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THE SEA-KINGS

IN

ENGLAND.

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THE

SEA-KINGS

IN

ENGLAND:

AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE OF THE TIME OF ALFRED.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "THE FALL OF NINEVEH."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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ENGLAND,

AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE.

CHAPTER I.

It is a too common supposition that monasteries have in all ages been little more than receptacles of the idle, and the superstitious. That there have been in all of them superstition and indolence may readily be granted, for, in what human establishment, from the palace to the hamlet, are not such to be found. That, in certain periods, there may have been in the monasteries a more than the average quantum of these, may be also yielded, for as the temptations to both have always been stronger in those places than in the

general world, it may be supposed that the sinners have also been, relatively, more numerous. That, however, a monk has always been a synonime for a drone, will never be allowed by those who are acquainted with the laborious works which have frequently been the produce of the cloister: and the smartest ridiculer of monkish bigotry may not be aware that probably to the monastic establishment he may owe that very skill and erudition by which his ridicule is pointed. In the monasteries certainly were the seeds of learning preserved through the dreary winter of centuries. It may perhaps be objected that the said seeds were kept much too long, and at last planted against the wish of their preservers, who afterwards did all they could to injure or destroy the fruit;—that the printing-press was the invention of a soldier, while the only remarkable discovery of a monk was gunpowder,—&c. &c. Just craving to premise that much may be said on both sides, we shall say not a word upon either. But whatever may, at later periods, have been the relative amount of diligence or indolence in the religious houses, certain it is

that in the Anglo-Saxon times sufficient care was taken to prevent convents from being mere sleeping-houses. That in the ninth century the monks were very assiduously employed in the cultivation of learning, cannot be asserted. King Alfred himself tells us, in his preface to his *Gregory's Pastorals*, that, " Very few were they on this side the Humber, (the most improved parts of England) who could understand their daily prayers in English, or translate any letter from the Latin. I think there were not many beyond the Humber; they were so few, that I indeed cannot recollect *one single instance* on the south of the Thames, when I took the kingdom." * But, if the monks had not much of the labour of study, they had labour of other kinds: and such as might perhaps after all contribute quite as much to the happiness of the individual, however it might subtract from his dignity. It is not absolutely certain that a learned prelate enjoys more happiness than a prosperous cobbler. This question, however, it is not necessary here to discuss. The labour of the monks, in short, was

* Alfred's Preface. Wise's Asser. p. 82.

of that kind to which the title more appropriately belongs,—it was the *bona fide* labour of the body. Every monk was expected to learn, and practise, some trade, or mechanical art: and the profits of these went to the general coffer. Within the walls of the larger convents, might be found the jeweller and goldsmith, the carpenter, the glass-maker, the dyer, the embroiderer, the smith, the weaver,—the *operative*, in short, of every calling. In the small priory of Cothelstone, which contained only sixty monks, there were several members who followed the more common occupations; but there were also one goldsmith, one glass-maker, and two embroiderers. True it is, that the two former, having at times but little employment, were wont to exercise themselves chiefly with the humbler labours of the smith and the carpenter; not the less the priory had to boast of containing artists of that prouder class: and, in testimony of this, a present in gold, or glass work, occasionally found its way from the good prior Edelhun to the superior of some greater monastery, or to some noble-

man, or wealthy thane, whose good opinion he desired to purchase.

The bearer of these gifts, and indeed the general courier for the whole community, had, for several years, been the good brother Elf; doomed by fate to be a monk, but by nature designed to have been a sort of harlequin-clown in the great pantomime of life. Never did squirrel confined in a cage manifest more impatient restlessness, and untiring activity, than poor brother Elf within the boundaries of the priory. Instead of singing the slow and solemn anthem, or gliding with tardy foot through the silent cloister, he would gladly have gone singing up to heaven's gate with the lark, or, with Shakespear's "naked new-born babe striding the blast,"—or his "cherubim, horsed on the sightless couriers of the air," would have posted to the four corners of the world: or with Puck have delighted to "put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes." Innumerable were the scrapes into which his unhappy activity had at first led him: endless the little penances that he had to undergo. Years, however, convert the frolick-

some kitten into the serious mouser, the urchin who robbed the orchard into the judge who condemns the thief, the tittering miss into the staid and solemn matron, and years had done something upon even brother Elf. He was, at the time when, as aforesaid, he designed a peep into the pantry of Leofric, at the ripe age of thirty; and years, and unceasing restraint, had done much to weaken the springs which, in his younger days, had kept up in him a sort of perpetual motion. But still he had to contend with a restlessness, and an impulse to action of some kind or other, which made quiet a painful endurance to him: and the knowledge of this induced the kind-hearted prior to afford him every harmless mode of gratifying it. If the presence of some member of the priory were required abroad, and if brother Elf were competent to the business in hand, to him was the duty assigned: and never did frolicksome poney, just turned loose into a May meadow, fling up his heels, and scamper at full stretch of his limbs, with glee more unbounded than brother Elf, even at the serious age which we have mentioned,

when suddenly, after a longer confinement than usual, he found himself fairly out of the priory, and saw the gates shut upon him. If the goldsmith, or the carpenter, the glass-maker, the dyer or the smith, wanted the assistance of any other hand, not regularly trained in his art, to brother Elf was the task assigned; and greedily was it always accepted by him. For himself, poor man! he had in youth been designed for the craft of the weaver: but he jerked his shuttle, and pressed upon his treddles, with such rapidity and eagerness, that his woof was snapped, and his warp rent, and his whole body bathed in perspiration, long before he could prevail upon himself to stop. What had been done was then to be undone; and this tedious work he could never abide.

"Father," he would say to his vexed, and pains-taking sire, "'tis of no use! I'd rather weave right on from sunrise to sun-down, than mend during one pater-noster."

"Ay, ay!" would the old man answer, "Thou speakest even too truly, son Elf; never, I fear me, but with the saints' especial

blessing, wilt thou ever mend at all. Christ have mercy upon me! What would thy poor mother Wiffie have told of, if her blessed eyes could have looked down from Heaven upon such a warp as thou hast made here! God help thee, and me!"

A good-natured carpenter, who pitied the old weaver, thought he would try the whirligig urchin at his own trade: "But I'll go a sure way with him," said the prudent man; "never a bit shall he touch tool of mine, till I have sweated the mad marrow out of him: axe and log, axe and log, that's all shall come near his fingers this many a month; or till the maggots are all out of him. Heavy axe, and elm-log,—let him work away,—small harm can he do any fashion."

To the carpenter, accordingly, went Elf; and the blessing and the sage advice of his father went with him.

"My dear son, Elf," said the old weaver, holding in his right hand the twitching paw of that youth, and, in his left, the corner of his well greased leathern apron, with which at times

he wiped the moisture from his eye,—" you are now about to leave the home of your father, to learn the craft by which you are, by God's blessing, and the sweat of your brow, to earn your daily bread. A blessed day may this be for you, my son! You are going to our kind acquaintance Grimbold, a good man, and a good carpenter as ever drove nail: and bethink you, son Elf, that Grimbold waxeth in years, and that he hath but one child, named after your blessed mother Wiffie; and that the maiden is at your own age; and also that Grimbold hath something of this world's gear, and doubtless will spare unto his daughter, or unto the youth that her shall espouse. Mind then, my son, the steps in which thou dost walk; and may be thou shalt some day have rule, and saw, chisel and hammer, and what not, of thy own; and be looked up to by the people of the land. Now, son Elf, three things I must charge unto thee, and see that thou forgettest them not. But now keep thy hands and thy feet steady for a moment, my son, and lend thine ears to me; and wag not thy head this way and that, like unto a sparrow that sitteth upon a dung heap,

and looketh where next it shall hop. Three things I would say unto thee. Thou lackest not parts, son Elf; and divers have I heard that spake, likening thee unto thy father, of whose weaving craft albeit I speak not at this present: but, though God hath given thee gifts, yet doest thou fling them from thee, by reason that thou doest with them more harm than good. Better not work at all, than work only to break the warp: better not take up the axe or the plane, than spoil wood and tool with overhaste; and perchance cut off thy finger into the bargain. Be heedful then;—do all that thou art bidden, but nought of thyself; remember thou art as a child, and must first be put into the way before thou beginnest to run, else wilt thou only go the farther wrong, the faster thou runnest. Of all things, touch not thy master Grimbold's tools, save such as he giveth unto thee; for what saith the proverb, 'It is dangerous to play with edged tools.' If thou doest mischief, thy father will be taxed to put it right. And take all things soberly, and wisely, son Elf: slow and sure, slow and sure,—think thou of that,—and say it

evermore unto thyself when thou wouldst put thy hand to aught; for thy toe may be chopped off in a twinkling, but thou knowest it hath taken many years to grow. And look that thou shout not, and leap not, and stamp not, and whistle not, and sing not, and tumble not over thy head, as thou hast been wont to do, when thou shouldst have been soberly minding thy prayers, or thy work. And if that thou must twirl round even as a top which a boy whippeth, look that thou strike not thy head, arms, or legs against the bright and sharp iron with which the shop of worthy Grimbold aboundeth; for a gimblet might take out thine eye, but God only could put it in again. And again, my son Elf, another proverb will I say unto thee, for truly thy tongue is like unto the clapper of the mill which ceaseth not; and Grimbold, I know, loveth not idle talk, 'Many words,' saith the proverb, 'many words fill not the bushel;' which meaneth that out of dry shavings thou canst not make an oaken table; as thou will soon find, being, as thou shall be, studious of carpentry-craft. And again another proverb,—but Elf thou heedest

me not, and dost twitch, and twist thy mouth and nose,—and dost shift with thy feet, like unto a dog when he looketh to see the chain drop from his neck,—hearken unto me I say, for the words of wisdom are more precious than fine gold. Yet another proverb will I say unto thee, —and ah! see that thou keepest it in thy remembrance three times a-day, for verily thou art ever at the time of meals an hungered, even as a wolf that hath four days fasted. But what saith the proverb, 'Down gutter-lane goeth house and home;' which signifieth that, if thou dost not moderate thy gluttony, assuredly Grimbold will turn thee out of his door in less than two days. Take heed then, my son, take heed! And now that I have said these things unto thee, go thy ways son Elf,—and may Christ, and all the holy saints, go with thee and direct thee!"

He who has seen a hound slipt from the leash, may know with what eagerness Elf bounded away from this durance of a few minutes. To honest Grimbold's house he went: and the prudent man supplied him with store of knotted wood, and a heavy axe, that, like an unbroken

horse, he might work down his fretful temper to somewhat like the calmness and weariness which will make him patient of instruction. The most positive charge was given him that he should, on no account, at any time, touch tool, or wood, but those which were assigned to him. To work then went Elf; and the active labour, the noise, the rending of the wood, the flying of the splinters, delighted him. Grimbold was pleased; and, after a time, went forth, leaving to the neophyte more, as he thought, than he could accomplish before his return. His stay was, however, longer than he had anticipated: The logs were hewn asunder;—the sweat poured from Elf's limbs,—his eyes were bright, his cheeks were flushed,—he had no more to do. But, when his limbs ceased to be employed, his curiosity began to work. He had observed his master busied with the plane, the chisel, the hammer, the saw, and he felt confident that he could imitate all which he had seen. He took up one tool after another,—but he thought of his father's advice, and his master's injunctions, and again laid them down. Grimbold did not come,—and

he again took them up. The whizzing of the plane, and the curling up of the shavings, had particularly pleased him. There lay upon the table a piece of oak, upon which Grimbold had been at work: over portions of this the enticing plane had glanced,—but, in the centre, was some carved work, that had cost much labour, and that he had carefully avoided touching. This Elf did not understand: he saw the wood that had been planed, and he felt the tool in his hand. His father's caution and Grimbold's command had run out their time; and Elf positively could wait no longer. Down went the plane; and with delight he heard, felt, and saw, the wonders of his hand. Grimbold was forgotten: stroke after stroke went rapidly on; and the carved work became, at length, of one equal smoothness and flatness with the rest. He seized next upon the chisel, and drove it relentlessly through wood and nail, till its edge was almost as blunt as the hammer: tried then his hand at the saw, which he broke: and concluded his labours by almost severing the thumb of his left hand by a blow of the addice.

"Phlebotomy," saith Galen, "is good to let out the humours of madness:" and in the case of Elf its effect was strong and instantaneous. The sight of what he had just done brought in rapid and alarming review before him all that he had done before. Then did he behold in terrible prospect the anger of the grim carpenter,—already did he seem to feel the admonitions of a broad, hard, heavy, leathern strap, which, though it had never been pointed out to him, he had quickly seen, and as quickly understood. What could he do? Alas! he *had* nothing to do; and something he must be doing. To wait for a flogging was disagreeable on two accounts; it was doing nothing, and it would lead to being done to. To hesitate was also painful, because it was to be still; to decide was to act, and therefore delightful. Elf bound his bleeding thumb with shavings, selecting those made by his own hand as far preferable to those made by his master, pouched a lump of barley cake and bacon,—designed in truth for both master and boy, but not so understood by the latter, who, feeling his single stomach far more than a match

for it, concluded that it could never, of course, have been intended to stand against two; bit off one huge mouthful, before he finally lost sight of it in his leathern pocket,—cast a rapid look upon every tool,—upon his logs, shavings, splinters,—clapped his sharp pointed hair cap upon his head,—then, rolling his eyes, and grinding his jaws, bolted out of the door; and in less than two hours, having in that time accomplished twelve miles, shot into his father's house. He had smeared his face with blood from his thumb; his look was wild; and, as he knew not well what to say to his father, he stood before him, gaping and silent.

Now it was the time when evening was closing in; and the pious weaver was about to give up work. His mind was happy and serene, for he was dwelling upon the splendid prospects of his son Elf, and he strove to hope that all would be well. Foot and hand were still active, but his thoughts were busied in a silent prayer that Christ would bless and prosper his unlucky son; or, if so it seemed better unto His wisdom, would take him from a world where, poor fel-

low! he seemed to be good for nothing but what was nought,—and place him with the just men made perfect in Abraham's bosom. He had just ceased this prayer, when Elf stood before him, disembodied, as he thought, and doubtless on his way to the mansions above. The old man's hand and foot were moved with so sudden a jerk that it seemed as if the whole machine was falling to pieces. Could Elf for three seconds have maintained silence and a fixed look, the consequence might have been disastrous to the poor weaver: but this was impossible; and his usual motion and tone of voice, so very unlike anything that could be conceived of a purified spirit, instantaneously set the good man right. Explanation, lamentation, exhortation, and almost castigation, followed. The urchin, whom, but the moment before, the good Coifi had mistaken for a glorious, heaven-bound soul,—he now took by the coat, and, with hand outstretched, was about to respite from its hanging state a scourge known well, though not oft, unto the culprit, when the sight of the yet bleeding thumb

arrested his purpose, and changed his wrath to pity and condolement.

The next day brought the wrathful Grimbold, and a heavy demand for compensation of damages. Elf did not appear. Poor Coifi knew not what to do with his son. To put him to the loom again would be to half ruin himself. He sent him to a swine-herd; where he would have nothing to do but to lead out the swine in the morning, to watch them by day, and to bring them back at night. This employment seemed pointed out by a special providence; for here he could neither mar work, nor break tools, nor do injury to himself. On the last day of the second week, however, back came Elf, and with him the wife of the swine-herd, protesting that, "ever since that jack-a-lantern had come to them, it seemed as if the devils had gotten into the swine, as they did in the Scripture many years bygone, as the priests told of: and that if they had but had a hill to run down, and a sea thereafter at the bottom, like unto Scripture pigs, it would have been God's grace if every grunter among them had not gone headlong

down, and drowned himself therein. And Master Coifi," added she; "how shall the hogs thrive and fatten if they are to be hunted up and down from morning till night, even as the rabbits are hunted by a young puppy hound? No, no, Master Coifi, keep the skim-the-wind to thyself; and God's blessing, and the virgin's, be upon him and thee! A good weaver, may be, he might make,—for hand and foot need never be still with him then,—but our hogs' flesh is not to be melted out of them by the fen-fire in your son's. I wish St Anthony's had been in his feet before he had come to lead the devil's dance as he has with our hogs, that were as fat, before, and as sleek, and as quiet,—God save us!—as the very abbots themselves. I tell you Master Coifi; three months hard feeding will not bring up what they have lost in these two weeks of ramping and roaring, and hurly burlying, such as was never before seen of swine since the Scripture times, and that's longer than either you or I can call to mind, I trow, Master Coifi."

The weaver was distressed. To keep Elf at

home, would soon be to have no home for either himself or son. Nothing could rest from his hands: nothing could be seen twice in the same condition: nothing could be found that was wanted: nothing used that was found. Coifi got him, at last, into the workshop of a blacksmith: "Here," thought he, "he will find few tools that he can injure,—little work that he can spoil: he will, moreover, be always under the eye of the smith; and something may after all be hoped for him,—unhappy child of my loins that he is, and named Elf after his grandfather, a good and a grave man!"

A very few days, however, brought to the sorrowing weaver the decision of Smotherwold the smith.

"I'll tell you what it is, Master Coifi,"—said the man of iron, as he doffed aside his shining leathern apron, and sat himself down by the weaver's wood fire, that he might discuss with him the matter in hand, and also certain hornfuls of stout cider,—"I'll tell you, Master Coifi, what it is. We smiths are hard working men; and, though we work in iron, and sometimes in

brass and in copper, small is the quantity that comes into our hands in the guise of money ;—to your health, Master Coifi ;—More need then that we get work quick out o' hand, that our small earnings may not be smaller. Now it is known to you, Master Coifi, who are yourself a workman, and held a master of your craft, as I may say even to your face, for all men say that o' you,"—(here the weaver drew his seat nearer the fire, and handled his cider horn) " it is known to you, I say, Master Coifi, that no workman can well work without his tools."

The weaver nodded approbation ; and seemed to expect, what he mentally entitled " a tightish argufication,"—for the brow of the smith looked big with great matters.

" But, Master Coifi, if the workman cannot have his tools at hand when they are wanted, tell me, I pray you, how can he work ?"

" That's quite true, Master Smotherwold," answered his companion ; for, as the song says,

' If the shuttle cannot be found,
The weaver will soon make his bed on the ground.' "

"Good!" replied the smith, "very good in truth, Master Coifi,—and I drink to you, and hope the iron.—that's your son, I mean,—may turn out better in the hammering than it looks for."

The weaver's countenance somewhat fell.

"Now we smiths," continued the man of metal, "use divers and many tools, which, if they be not ready to hand, might sometimes as well be at the bottom of the Red-sea,—and that I take to be at Watchet in this country; where once when I went to go down unto the deep, as the people say, I beheld the waters all as red,—ay as red as red lead, or thereupon: but some folks tell me I am wrong in that matter, and that the real Red-Sea is in Egip, but where Egip is I know nought; but, be that how it will, the long and the short of the matter is this, Master Coifi, that if we smiths cannot have our tools at hand, they may just as well be at the bottom of any sea whatsomever, red, blue, black or yellow, if such there be, and why shouldn't there? Now here comes the point. Your son Elf, Master Coifi, is just the lad to distract and

ruin all the smiths that ever handled hammer. Devil a tool is there that can keep in the same place while a man might look over his shoulder, if once your son Elf can get within hand-gripe of it. You know what the proverb saith—

'When the iron is white with the fire,
The smith may work it unto his desire:
But, when the iron is cold and black,
He may hammer or whistle, his labour will lack.'

"Now, Master Coifi, it has been clean impossible for me to work iron since your son Elf came to my smithy, for, before I can get three strokes at the iron, some tool or other that I have laid ready for twisting, or drawing, or what not, is sure to be out of the way,—and then the iron cools, and I may whistle, as the proverb saith, till it gets hot again. Furthermore, I must tell you, Master Coifi, that I have escaped merely through God's grace, from broken bones, or perhaps worse, and that more than once."

The poor weaver looked alarmed.

"Yes," continued the smith: "whether the

devil be bodily in the limbs of your son Elf, Master Coifi, I do not take it upon me to say, being small of either priest or conjurer; but, if so be that God do let Zernebock do such whig-maleeries upon poor sinful men as he used to do upon 'em in Bible times, that we have both heard tell of, then, Master Coifi, if you would have my advice upon the matter,—why I'd just have you take him quietly to the priest, and let him try if he cannot wile the old 'un out of his mouth; for I know not where else he could get either out or in, though I think, if the foul thing could compass himself in any moderate way, that he might have a chance o' doing both down *that* way, and small harm to either the lad's teeth, or Sathan's horns: and that leads me, Master Coifi, to another thing that I would have told you of, if so be the lad and I could any way have agreed: but as we have parted, why I may save my breath to fill my bellows, when I can fill it with nought else: Howsomever, Master Coifi, I may as well just say, talking of bellows, that, after a half day's fast, I do on my conscience believe that your son, if so he were minded, could have eaten

up every bit of leather about 'em, and not stuck much at the wood either, if so be it were but a thought smeared over with any kind of butter, or hog's grease. You don't take your horn, Master Coifi, here's to you."

During this discourse the weaver groaned repeatedly; and once or twice looked angry: but the smith went on with so much apparent good nature through it all, that Coifi could not resent even his least relished observations.

"I was going to tell you," continued Smotherwold, "a little more of your son's vagaries; and specially of his being nigh to do me some grievous bodily harm, by catching up hammer, or iron, or whatever big thing came to his hand, and swinging it round, or hurling it up, or—I can't tell you what,—the devil must be in him, that's sure;—and now it strikes me at this moment, Master Coifi,—and you may use your own thoughts upon it,—but it does seem to me that nothing else than the devil within his belly could make him eat as he doth: and reason good, too, Master Coifi, if you think on't—for the devil is well known to be the greatest eater,—barring

your Elf I *do* think,—that ever was beheld with eye; seeing that the priests tell us he goeth about like unto a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Now, if he *be* in the belly of the lad,—and good reason there is to think it,—why no wonder, Master Coifi, that he eats as he doth,—for, you see, there are two o' them chewing at once. But lay your own head to work at it, Master Coifi; and speak your thoughts quietly to the priest: and mayhap he may then be got out of him, and no harm to the lad. One thing, howsomever,—to give the devil his due,—and mayhap I am paying him no more than belongs to him in good sooth,—one thing I must say of your son, or the devil within him,—and that is, that, for a blast at the forge bellows, I never met his fellow. Blow—blow—blow—and never a bit tired:—he'll blow you, Master Coifi, a whole day, and look never the worse, while another, ay and a strong man to boot, would be drowthy and done in half the time. Up he jumpeth,—for the lad you know is short in the reach,—up he jumpeth, and down he pulleth,—and up again jumpeth he,—and down again pulleth he,—and

all the while looketh as bright and as pleased as a kitten with a worsted ball. Now, whether this, as I said, is of himself, or of the devil within him, who delighteth evermore, as we all know, in a good fire, and may therefore be well thought to take pleasure in working at the bellows,—I will not, as I told you, take on me to say. But one thing I must tell you, Master Coifi,—and, whether that smacks of the devil or not, wiser heads than yours or mine must 'stablish. Your son Elf, Master Coifi, hath all the tricks of the devil,—but, on my conscience, he hath the voice of an angel, and can sing like any sky lark. Now,—if you will have my mind,—I just tell you that he is not fit for any one occupation in this land; and you may put him to learn trade, or craft, of six hundred, and he be never the wiser, nor you the better off;—but, when the maggots are a little out of him, and he hath had some teaching, such as I can give him, in the art and practice of singing,—I do think, Master Coifi, that he will make a special good monk; that is, you understand me, if that voice within him be really and truly his own voice, and not

that of the devil, who they say was one of the best singers in heaven before he was turned out for eating fruit that didn't belong to him. Now, you see, Master Coifi; if so be that it *be* the devil singing in him,—and you get the priest to turn him out,—why there's an end of his monking,—for I know nought beside his voice that could make a prior take in such a scant o' grace. But, at the same time, if the devil be got out of him, why then you know he may turn out as good a smith, or weaver, as the best of us: so that, look you, Master Coifi; it's for you to consider, whether you'd have him a quiet handicraftsman like one of us, or a sweet singing monk with a devil in his belly."

To this counsel did the weaver lend a serious ear: and, on the first occasion that presented itself, opened his sad case to a monk of the priory of Cothelstone, and prayed his services to dispossess his unfortunate son of the devil that had entered into him. Nor did the good Coifi forget to mention the wonderful sweet voice of the youth, albeit he gave no hint of its suspected owner. The eventual result was, that Elf was

taken into the priory, and kept under a long course of rigid discipline, which somewhat abated his frolicksomeness. He was, however, the best tempered imp in the world, and excited the good will of all who approached him; so that much allowance was ultimately made for his uncontrollable animal spirits, and every harmless gratification of them was granted to him. We need not say that no devil was cast out of him; but may add that his voice as he grew older was not so good as in his younger years, while his appetite long maintained its reputation, though somewhat, at times, to the injury of his own.

CHAPTER II.

Fast days were to brother Elf an abomination; and he pertinaciously insisted that they, and nothing else, had damaged his voice. If then, he argued, a sweet voice of song were pleasing to God, and if fasting spoiled the voice, most certain it was that fasting could never be acceptable unto Him; it became, therefore, his individual duty to evade it whenever he could. For those who had no voice to sing unto the Lord, fasting might be all very well; and he never was disposed to quarrel with such, though they had chosen to fast from Yule to Yule: but for a good singer, like himself, it was assuredly sinful; and, though commanded by the superiors of the church, ought to be religiously avoided by him as often as possible; since they who commanded to fast were men, whereas the injunction to eat that he

might sing the good song, appeared to come from heaven itself.

Now, in order to manage this little arrangement of his own, it was necessary that brother Elf should be upon the best terms with the kitchener of the priory; and this he carefully and successfully attended to. He, accordingly, fared in general very well, and much better than he could have done if uncountenanced by that functionary; since the short space of time allotted to the conventual meal would by no means have sufficed for the satisfaction of his hunger. But, upon the days of fast, the kitchener dared not transgress the rules by giving to brother Elf, or permitting him to take for himself, the richer and more savoury foods which were forbidden. It had, therefore, been for some time a practice of the good brother's, to make some provision before-hand, by hoarding privately up, on the days of feast, such good things as, on the days of fast, he could not have procured; and in this scheme he had, by means of the private entrée allowed him to the kitchen, and the assistance of a concealed pocket of good dimensions, suc-

ceeded admirably: in so much that, after the spare meal which, on the fast days, he had taken with the brethren, he could retire to his private sanctuary, and take down with a thankful heart the cold collations with which his provident industry had supplied him. The amazing reduction in size of such joints as had occasionally been placed at his disposal on the allowed days, often astonished the kitchener; but he pitied the poor hunger-bitten singer, and said nothing about it.

On one morning, however,—a few days previous to that on which we introduce brother Elf at the door of Leofric's pantry,—the just indignation of the kitchener had been raised by finding that, during his momentary absence from the kitchen, a huge portion of venison, not more than half-roasted, had been cut away, while the haunch was yet before the fire. This was, on every account, abominable to him; and he resolved to stop such proceedings for the future. Well enough did he know who the culprit must be: he knew also that brother Elf was just setting forth upon some business to Taunton, and

that no moment must be lost. Without giving himself time to cool upon the injury, he repaired to the presence of the prior, and there accused the luckless brother Elf of the deed. The prior himself went instantly with the kitchener to the cell of the culprit, and detected him in the very act of devouring the purloined, and half-dressed, viands.

Now the eating of flesh not sufficiently cooked was considered by the Saxons as an abomination deserving of an express penance; and this was immediately pronounced upon the sinner; who had, moreover, the additional mortification of finding himself suddenly cut off from the pleasure that he had anticipated in his walk. The penance prescribed was, to poor brother Elf, of the most distressing kind; but it was rendered doubly grievous to him by the imposition of another, which the prior Edelhun thought the enormity of the case demanded. The regulation established among the Saxons was, that if any person eat half-dressed meats, ignorantly, he should fast three days; if knowingly, four days,—taking during that time nothing but bread,

green herbs, and water. Surely prior Edelhun ought to have deemed such an expiation sufficient from such a sinner! But it was the moment of his anger;—he saw in his mind's eye the disfigured haunch, and proceeded thus.

"A four days' fast upon green herbs, water, and bread, will not, I know, be pleasant to thine infirmities, brother Elf; but even here the rod must not be stayed: for thy soul's good must this devil within thee be mortified. Thou hast defiled thyself with eating of the forbidden food; and, to compass thy wicked desires, hast thou broken the law of God as well as of man, in that thou hast, with unrighteous hand, purloined, taken, and clandestinely stolen, that which was not thine own, but the goods of other men, even of thy brethren of the priory. Now, had not thy limbs been at the disposal of the wicked spirit, to go hither and thither, haply thou mightest not have done this wickedness, in as much as, if thou couldst not have gone bodily into the kitchen, thou couldst not assuredly have cut off the venison, even while it was yet turning before the fire. As thy body, therefore, hath sinned

with thy soul, forasmuch as, without the bodily motion of thy limbs, as aforesaid, thou couldst not have done this thing,—so shall thy body also be punished, even in that wherein it hath sinned, meaning thereby in the motion of its limbs by which it hath sinned;—therefore, brother Elf,—in addition to thy fast of four days, we do now impose upon thee that for four days thou shalt remain in thy cell, not going forth thence, nor consoling thyself with aught whatever, whether it be handicraft, or other work, or with the company of thy brethren, but with thy meditations, and thy prayers, and thy holy songs only. And so, good brother, the blessing of God be with thee."

The prior retired, and the door of the cell was fastened upon the unhappy man. But we must not distress the reader by the picture of his misery. The kitchener regretted what he had done; for he thought the punishment too great. He himself went to the cell, soon after the mid-day refection, to carry the mess of bread and green herbs. As he drew near, he heard the sound of feet rapidly leaping from end to end of the cell, and the voice of its inmate in

quick alternations of song and discourse,—a line of song, interrupted by rapid and vehement ejaculation, which again was followed by song. He opened the door: brother Elf sprang forward to the large bowl,—but looked with a reproachful silence upon the kitchener. The kitchener looked at brother Elf, and pressed his hand, as if mutely expressing regret for what he had done, and for what the poor brother had to suffer. The heart of Elf expanded.

"I forgive thee, brother Mollo," he said, "but thou knewest my infirmity. I forgive thee. The saints bless thee! This is a state of trial, brother,—man is born to trouble. But thou hast brought me a large loaf, and of greens enough. Thank thee, my brother, thank thee! Christ will bless us both yet. How did the brethren like the haunch? But I shall see thee again before vespers, brother Mollo; and doubtless—though the loaf be large ——."

"I will be with thee again brother"—said the kitchener interrupting him, "but now I cannot tarry. Take thy poor food; and may it be blessed, and made rich unto thee!"

He retired, after exchanging an affectionate

farewell with the poor prisoner, who instantly applied himself to the loaf.

This,—to his astonishment,—opened in his hand, and discovered to his delighted eyes, a spacious excavation, containing sundry slices of delicious cold meats, sufficient for a meal to six common stomachs.

" It hath ! it hath !" he exclaimed, " the poor food hath indeed been made rich unto me, even as the good brother Mollo prayed for me that it might be made rich ! The blessing of the saints be upon this meal !"

After this short grace, he fell upon the viands ; and ate, and praised the kitchener and the saints at hasty intervals, till his work was accomplished. The next days brought him a similar miracle of bread turned into beef, fowls, and venison ; but still his spirits were sad, and the viands were cold. Prior Edelhun himself thought the punishment that he had inflicted too heavy upon an offender so peculiarly susceptible of its pains ; but would not, nevertheless, recall, or alter, a judgment that had been formally passed. On the fifth morning, however, by way of making

some little compensation to the sufferer, he summoned him to his presence; and, after a very brief admonition not to sin again, sent him upon some business, of no very important nature, to the castle of Leofric, and to one or two persons who held lands of the priory, unto whom he was bidden to intimate that the yearly rent had been due at the last feast of St Michael, and must be thought of. With infinite delight did the released prisoner hear this direction; and hardly could he tarry till the long sentence was finished. After taking, with an eagerness that looked as if he had rather designed to bite it, the hand which the prior, in token of forgiveness, had extended for him to kiss, he made his reverence, and hasted to depart. With all the gravity that he could command, he issued from the gate: but no sooner found himself completely screened from observation than, with arms and legs flinging, and kicking, as if he were mad, he gave vent to the joy that had been almost bursting him while kept under control. Fain would he have sung, and shouted; but that he feared to do so because, as he said, "the ear heareth afar.

and taketh note thereof." On then he went,—walking gravely where he might perhaps have been seen, and performing a hundred anticks where he thought himself secure.

A very short time brought him to the castle; but he went not in at the southern gate, though that lay the nearest to him,—because he desired first to have a little discourse with the larderer, and the pantler, and the cellarer, whom he knew right well, and was anxious to greet; since it was now an hour since he had poorly broken his fast upon a pasty of eels, and the calls of nature were strong within him. Through the northern gate then he sped, and stood soon at the door of the larder, eager to enter. The reader may perhaps think that we have kept him standing there a most unconscionable time, when we had nothing immediately for him to do, but to peep through a well-known chink, and espy the amiable Oswulf in the act of mixing with the food of Edmund the poisonous philtre. We acknowledge the sin, but hope the sentence inflicted upon us will not be very severe. Alas brother Elf! our affection for thee hath led us

too far astray! Thou hast not only been in scrapes thyself, but hast been the cause of a scrape to thy humble biographer. His appetite to thee hath been as unreasonable as thine to every thing. Here thou art at last however,—thy body bent, thy legs apart, thy hands upon thy knees, thy head on one side, peeping through the small chink, that thou mayst see if the coast be clear. Well knowest thou that the prudent Kentwina walketh at times that way; and not willingly wouldst thou that the holy brother Elf should meet her eye within the sanctuary of the larder, lest she should marvel thereat, and thou shouldst be called upon to explain that which it would sorely puzzle thee to account for.

Brother Elf, by the gradual movement of his head, had contrived to make every ray of light within the larder pass through the small crevice, and thence to his eye. Upon this was imprinted no human form save that of Oswulf, whose presence he did not regard; and he was therefore about to enter, when the unusual expression upon the face of that youth, and the circum-

spection of his movements, arrested his attention; and, at last, strongly excited his suspicions. He beheld him, with a demoniac look, mixing with a bowl of food a white powder which, after looking cautiously round, he had drawn from a pocket of his doublet. While he continued stirring the mess, he turned his head slowly in every direction, as if he feared lest the very walls should look upon his deed. His lips were drawn wide, and slightly apart, showing his hard-closed teeth;—his eye looked cruel and sly;—poisoner seemed written upon his face.

Brother Elf retired on tiptoe. It was very hard upon him: he had beheld joints, and savoury pasties,—he had breathed the aroma that penetrated the very door; yet he was to quit the fruit untasted. But, though he felt himself to be a martyr, yet in such a cause he rejoiced to suffer. Could he, indeed, have snatched a hasty morsel to cheer him for the present, he would have been thankful: but the urgency was great, and he resolved to endure his ill fate with firmness. He had not so seldom frequented the

same spot, at the same hour, as to be ignorant for whose meal the simple bowl of pottage was reserved: and he knew too well the blackness of Oswulf's heart, and the hatred which he bore to Edmund, not to think him capable of any act of villainy towards that excellent youth. Now he loved Edmund, for his sweet voice, and his skill upon stringed instruments; and, moreover, for his kind intercessions, many a time and oft, when brother Elf had fallen under the displeasure of the prior: also for a good word, in that brother's behalf, spoken now and then by him unto Oswin, the chief butler in the castle of Leofric. Hasting therefore away, he procured an immediate interview with Edmund, under pretext of bringing from father Cynewulf a message that demanded instant hearing, and, with a face that expressed perfect horror, detailed to him that which he had seen, and conjured him on no account to touch the dreadful bowl. Edmund as earnestly conjured him to keep the strictest silence upon the matter; and promised to be on his guard. With many thanks then he left him; and soon after with composure took his seat at

the table where the family were now assembled for the morning meal.

Brother Elf, who was much of a favourite with Leofric, had been invited to join them; and it will be taken for granted that he offered no objection. It was observed, however, that he looked pale, and was far less talkative than usual: and though, now and then, during the meal, he cast up his eyes to the pictures of the blessed evangelists, and to the lion and the calf thereupon, and seemed as if he would address himself to speak on that interesting point of debate, yet the half-formed word died away upon his lips; and he seemed wholly incapable of anything but a quick and persevering motion of his under jaw, accompanied by a sound somewhat resembling that which may be heard on the outside of a stable door, soon after the corn chest has been opened, and a portion of its contents transferred to the manger, for the consideration of a quick feeder, just come from a journey.

Edmund, in the brief interval betwixt his conference with brother Elf and his appearance at the meal, had procured the suspected bowl to be

brought to him, and another, exactly resembling it, to be placed upon the table in its stead.

"Oswulf," said he to brother Elf, "is, I understand, about to confer upon us the unusual honour of his company at the breakfast; and from his deportment, and looks, I believe that I may judge of the nature of his design in assisting at the preparation of my pottage. Take not you, however, any note of him, or of me; else he will surely afterwards suspect, and bear ill will towards you."

The monk promised compliance; and certainly demeaned himself like one wholly devoted to the one great purpose in hand. Oswulf did not immediately appear; and Edmund, in expectation of him, deferred the commencement of his meal. He came at last; and Edmund remarked that, at the moment of his entrance, he cast a sidelong glance at him; and again, as he sat down, at the bowl. The fiendish look, and the deadly hue of his cheek and lip, told Edmund the black thoughts that were in his breast. With perfect calmness,—speaking at intervals cheerfully to Ethelburga, who sat beside him,—Edmund dip-

ped into the bowl the silver rimmed spoon of Buffalo-horn, and commenced his meal. Ever and anon he glanced a look at Oswulf,—who feigned to be wholly occupied with his food,—and marked the progress of his emotions.

As he conveyed to his mouth the first morsel, he perceived that the side-long glancing eye of Oswulf seemed to emit a dark fire; and that his deathy lips were affected with slight convulsive quiverings. As he went on, these disappeared, and a deep flush gathered over the face of the wretch; and around his now purpled lips played a grin of demoniac exultation, which Edmund almost expected to end in a burst of horrid laughter. His snake-like eyes, meantime, shot, ever and anon, their delighted glances toward the intended victim, and his whole countenance and manner expressed diabolical triumph. Edmund could scarcely contain his composure as he became thoroughly convinced of the horrid intentions of Oswulf; and for a time remained in gloomy silence. Oswulf, at length, with a tone of vulgar gaiety, arose from the table; and Edmund immediately followed to the door, and re-

quested a little conversation with him. This somewhat surprised Oswulf, who at first surlily refused to go to the apartment that Edmund proposed for their conference. He went, however, on being further urged; and, having reached the chamber, of which Edmund closed the door after them, fiercely demanded his business with him. Edmund replied by opening a cupboard, and placing upon the table before Oswulf the poisoned bowl. Looking Oswulf full in the face, he pointed to this; but did not speak. There was a short silence; and the face of Oswulf grew pale. Assuming, however, almost immediately, an air of surprise, and offended dignity, he demanded an explanation.

"Is the fool mad?" said he, "What, in the fiend's name, do you mean by staring and pointing there? Speak, if you have a tongue in your calf's head; for I shan't waste my time, when the dogs are all ready for the otter-hunt, with your tomfooleries. The good morning to you, Sir Edmund, and a good digestion of your humours to boot."

He was about to leave the room; but Edmund moved betwixt him and the door.

"Stay awhile, Sir Oswulf," said he with a calm, but severe tone, "I point to that bowl,—and you know my meaning. Draw not down perdition upon your soul by again attempting the act. The eye of God beholds, though that of man see not!"

"Get out of my way, villain!" cried Oswulf in fury, "and carry your stinking preachery and yourself elsewhere. By the pit of hell! I'll drive my sword into your heart if you stop my way. The devil d—n you for a sneaking beggar! get out of my way, I tell you, or I'll nail your carcase to the door,—as long before now I ought to have done. A curse have you been to us all; and blithe will be the day when we are rid of you."

"Do not," answered Edmund, "resort to means which must bring the wrath of God upon you. Haply you may soon have your wish, without incurring the guilt of murder. Sir Oswulf,—your hands have tempered that food,—dare you yourself partake of it?"

"Liar and beggar!" exclaimed Oswulf, "I

know nothing of your accursed mess, and wish to know as little of you. Eat your own trash yourself,—and if it chokes you, why the hangman saves his rope, and the devil gets his due; and God speed the hour, that's all I have to say."

"Sir Oswulf," replied Edmund, somewhat kindling at the look, and the coarse invective of his opponent, "the air and language of a bully will not efface the crime of meditated murder. Your hands have infused the poison in that bowl, and you deserve chastisement from mine, or from the rod of the law. Say that I go before Leofric, with the witness of your guilt in my hands,—what, think you, will be your reward? But gladly would I hide from him, and from all men, the knowledge of this deed. Pledge me your oath before the altar that you will never again seek my life, and that which is passed shall be for ever buried in oblivion."

During this speech the face of Oswulf became inflamed with the rage of a disappointed fiend; his eyes flashed fire, and the foam flew from his lips.

"Thus be it buried then!" he exclaimed; and

snatching out his sword, made a furious thrust at the breast of his enemy. The action was so rapid and unexpected that Edmund had no time to draw his own weapon for defence. He so far parried the thrust, however, with his hand, that the blade, passing through the doublet, only just grazed his side. The violence of the rush forward brought Oswulf close to him, and Edmund instantly placed his hands against the villain's breast, and threw him back with such force that Oswulf seemed almost lifted from his feet; and, without an attempt to save himself, fell heavily backward upon the floor. Expecting a renewal of the assault Edmund instantly drew out his sword,—but his opponent lay motionless, and the weapon had dropped from his hand.

Edmund was now alarmed, and grieved. He sprang to Oswulf,—raised his head from the ground,—and began eagerly to chafe his temples. At that moment the door flew open: and Leofric, followed by Kentwina, entered.

"In God's name! what means this?" cried Leofric.

" My son ! my son !" shrieked Kentwina, " he is killed ! he is killed !"

" Answer me instantly Edmund,"—said Leofric, in a peremptory tone, " I see swords out, and my son is on the floor,—perhaps dead."

" He is not dead, my kind father," said Edmund, in great agitation. " He has had a severe fall,—I cannot well explain to you how it arose, —but he breathes now, and I trust is not much hurt ;—see ! he opens his eyes—I thrust him from me, and he fell—but I could not help it— I merely defended myself."——

" Oh ! the blessed virgin !" cried brother Elf, who had bolted into the room, pale as a ghost, —his lips unwiped—his eyes distended with affright, and his cheeks with food, while in his left hand he bore a fragment of pie crust, and in his right a knife,—" Oh the blessed virgin ! and the saints ! has he killed him ? I thought it would come to this !"

Edmund looked him in the face with an expression that made him instantly aware of his mistake, and of the impropriety of such suspicious words. They did not appear, however, to have

been noticed by any other person; and the conscience-stricken brother Elf remained in silence, looking at the reviving man, and pursuing the motion of his jaws, till it occurred to him that he might do better service by hasting for Leech Wiglaf. Edmund urged him to do this; and the good brother disappeared.

Oswulf was now recovering his senses, but, when at length he attempted to rise, he found that his right arm was useless. A little examination proved that it was broken; and the distress of his parents, and of Edmund, became extreme. Oswulf was conveyed to bed; and the surgical skill of Leech Wiglaf was put into immediate requisition.

This was afterwards a source of great vexation to poor Kentwina: for, though she at first felt grateful for the aid which that learned person had rendered, yet the air of consequence which he speedily assumed, and the profusion of Latin words which he thought proper to inflict upon her, and indeed upon all who could not understand them, became at length so insupportable to her, that she was often heard to protest

she would rather leave every bone in her body broken, than have one of them set by a man that scorned God's blessed English, and could not talk of a broken arm without his accursed hosse-frac, or whatever it was, in that abominable heathen Greek Latin that it was shameful for a Christian leech to deal in.

A close enquiry, which Leofric soon made of Edmund and Oswulf, separately, as to the origin and manner of the quarrel, terminated rather unfavourably for the former. It had been remarked by Leofric, and all present, that Edmund had followed Oswulf to the door of the breakfast apartment immediately after the meal; and the presumption was, therefore, that the dispute, whatever it might be, had arisen with him. The nature of this dispute, however, Leofric could not learn from either party. Oswulf dared not assign the true cause, and Edmund would not. While the former, however, complained of having received the grossest ill treatment, without provocation on his part; and of having been at last struck down merely because he upbraided Edmund for the injury that he was

doing the whole family by preventing an alliance with that of Castle Maximus,—the latter declined saying more than that unpleasant words had arisen between them; and that, as Oswulf had thrust at him with his sword, he had, in self-defence, thrown him down.

Leofric was sincerely attached to Edmund: and had never seen in him any conduct but such as was most honourable: there was, nevertheless, in the present instance, an evident reservedness, a want of his usual candour and openness of speaking, which operated unfavourably for him upon the mind of the good thane: so that when Edmund, a few days after the quarrel, intimated to Leofric a wish to offer his personal services to the Earl of Somerset in the contest which, according to the opinion of that nobleman, might be soon expected to arise betwixt the West Saxons, and the Northmen under Hubbo, who had been for some time ravaging the southern coast of Wales,—he met with an opposition to his project so cold, as, to his proud and sensitive mind, to convey a real acquiescence. His resolution was immediately taken; and

every preparation made by him for his departure.

Leofric's heart, however, yearned toward him: and, when he thought of losing the noble, generous, handsome, accomplished, and affectionate youth, for whom he had so long felt the love of a father, the tears came to his eyes; and he could not consent to part from him. Kentwina also,—though, under the influence of parental love, and the fiendish insinuations of Oswulf, she had frequently and bitterly censured his conduct, when Ethelburga, or father Cynewulf, or the good brother Elf, had vindicated him,—yet expressed regret to lose him thus. But the grief of the gentle Ethelburga was most poignant; and her face, from the day when Edmund announced his intention to depart, was never seen to smile.

This excessive interest in his fate was, of course, a full, and unanswerable, evidence of the state of her heart: and the expectants of wedding-feasts, new coats, and beautiful kirtles, thought she ought to be ashamed of herself; and that it was high time for the house to be

cleared of a fellow that had broken the brother's arm, and the sister's heart, to say nothing of God's peace and the king's, which had never been kept two days in the place since he entered it.

It was at length agreed that Edmund should not leave the castle except in the event of an actual invasion,—of which, by the way, Leofric himself entertained small apprehension,—and this arrangement seemed to diffuse joy through the little family. Even Oswulf feigned satisfaction; though he took care to conceal the grounds of it. The manifest concern which Edmund had felt on his account contrasted strongly with the bitter hatred which he himself had uniformly expressed against that youth: and this had not escaped the observation of his parents. Their endeavours to inculcate a more Christian charity, pointed out to him the policy of at least assuming the outward shew of such a feeling: and he perceived, moreover, that this would be an admirable cloak for concealing the weapon which he proposed to make use of when strength and opportunity should serve. He affected, there-

fore, to forgive the injury that had been done to him by Edmund; and expressed a hope that, for the future, they should be upon better terms together.

Edmund's instinctive sagacity saw the hollowness of this pretended reconcilement; and he awaited to prove the result. Meantime, as he had not for some weeks visited castle Maximus, and was anxious to hear more of the state and prospects of the country than he could learn at Cothelstone, and also to enjoy, what he could no where else enjoy, the presence of the beautiful and noble Elfrida, he mentioned to Leofric his wish, and on the following morning set forth.

He had a kind reception from all; but found a gloom and anxiety upon the countenances of the Earl and his son. That of Elfrida beamed upon him like a rich spring landscape when the sun comes forth. He found at Castle Maximus strangers who were frequently in close consultation with the Earl; and he perceived that, in many parts, the fortifications had been repaired and strengthened. The number of followers in the castle was also increased; and Sigifred, or

the Earl, daily superintended their discipline. He soon learned that increasing apprehensions were entertained by the Earl of the probable fate of the country, threatened, as he feared it to be, by the ferocious Hubbo, of whose atrocities he had obtained recent intelligence, disunited in itself, and under the rule of a monarch who, in the opinion of the Earl, and of some others, was totally unfit to be at the helm when such a tempest threatened.

"Who trusts in him? who adheres to him?" would the Earl often say to those in whom he reposed confidence,—"What has he done, since he came to the throne, but estrange the love of his nobles, and temporize with the barbarians whom he ought to have extirpated? A good and pious man he may be,—and is,—for who has ever questioned that?—but are these times when a monarch should throw down the sword, and take up the pen, and the book, teach law to judges, and divinity to abbots,—and learning to the schools? Me myself, at my years, he would have compelled to take up the quill, like a school boy! There is not a noble in the kingdom of

Wessex whom he has not insulted by his exhortations, and almost commands, to read from the book, and to sign with the name, instead of the cross, as our fathers did. But, when the fierce Northman comes upon us, what then will avail his book craft? When the sword has to fall upon a Danish crest, will the steel, does he think, be the sharper that the hand which wields it can also guide the goose quill over the hide of an ass? He has been ever preaching virtue and wisdom, when he ought to have been sounding the trumpet, and leading on his armies. A few pedant priests he may haply have pleased; but he has alienated his nobles, and lost his country."

In this strain would Earl Ethelbert often harangue; and his sentiments were, of course, applauded by those whom he had taught to think with him. But we cannot admit him as an expositor of the state of the kingdom, and the real character of its monarch: and shall therefore request the patience of our readers while we endeavour to present them from ourselves with a less prejudiced, and a more correct and comprehensive view of the state of the country, and of the

extraordinary monarch who ruled it, than could with propriety have been put into the mouth of any of the *dramatis personæ* of our tale. As this, however, may be deemed an assumption of the historian's prerogative, we promise beforehand to abdicate our unjust throne with all possible haste. Meantime, for the consolation of those readers who may be kind enough to feel some little interest in the mere story, without caring much about the state of the country, or the character of her truly great monarch, we beg to say, that, without any very serious injury to their comprehension of the rest of the work, they may venture to pass over the whole of the next somewhat long chapter.

CHAPTER III.

A VERY rapid sketch may suffice to recall to most readers the chief historical events that followed the invasion already mentioned in the beginning of our tale. The army which, it may be remembered, we left advancing under Hubbo, Ivar, Sidroc, and others, against East Anglia, soon overthrew that kingdom, and put Edmund, the pious, but weak monarch, to death. Godrun was appointed king in his room: Ivar and Hubbo then turned their arms northward: and another large body of invaders attacked Wessex. Ethelred and Alfred opposed them. Several battles were fought, with no very decisive ultimate results: new invaders continually strengthened the former: new battles were fought: Ethelred received a wound at Morton in Berks, of which he soon after died; and Alfred succeeded to the throne of Wessex. But it was with reluc-

tance that he accepted the dangerous and difficult post. The West Saxons had, within a few months, fought eight pitched battles against the Northmen, besides supporting a war of skirmishes that allowed no repose, day or night. They were exhausted, their armies were thinned, their enemies were stronger than ever. The Northmen were now bent upon the total subjection, and occupation, of the country: the German Ocean was for ever darkened by their fleets. Within a month after the accession of Alfred to the throne, the Northmen, with great superiority of strength, attacked the Saxon army at Wilton. The stroke was unexpected,—the king was absent,—the defeat was decisive. Mercia refused to Wessex the aid which she had herself received from her. The throne of Burrhed shook to every blow inflicted upon that of Alfred,—but the insensate king remained an idle spectator. Alfred saw no hope but in a peace. His offer was accepted; and the enemy quitted Wessex. But they left Wessex only to fall upon Mercia. They were soon victorious. The cowardly Burrhed

quitted his throne, and fled to Rome. Mercia was completely overrun.

England was now divided between the West Saxons, who occupied the southern parts, and the Northmen, who had conquered all the rest of the island. Five years of hollow peace succeeded the treaty that Alfred had made with the Northmen: but they then violated it. The king again negotiated with them; and even, according to one writer, used money to purchase repose. He bound them to peace by every oath that he thought might control them, but, within a few days, as it is said, they surprised and slew a body of his horsemen: mounted the horses, rode to Exeter, seized the castle, and remained there for several months. Alfred at length attacked them; but again contented himself with exacting from them oaths that they would depart from his kingdom. They went; but, meantime, other, and far more numerous, hordes of Northmen were spreading themselves over Mercia. Yet we have no evidence that any measures had been taken to prevent, or to oppose, an attack upon Wessex: and when, as will hereafter be seen, the storm

actually burst forth, the country seemed to fall strengthless before it.

Such is the account left by historians; and, when we reflect that a kingdom apparently so feeble, and so ill directed, was under the rule of the great Alfred, there certainly appears in these facts, *if facts they be*, something very difficult to understand.

Those who have read Mr Sharon Turner's admirable Anglo-Saxon History will recollect the manner in which he has treated the subject. Adopting many of his views, we may perhaps be allowed to state the question in our own way, and to supply a few additional conjectures.

In the relative positions of the Saxons, and of the invaders,—in the nature of the Anglo-Saxon government,—and in the characters of the people, and of the monarch,—we shall look for an explanation of the mystery.

Much censure has been thrown upon the king. Mr Turner himself, though a warm admirer of Alfred, admits the justice of it, in part. No perfect man has ever lived; and let the great Alfred, therefore, bear his portion of human infirmity:

his shoulders are strong enough to sustain a far greater load than his worst enemy has ever heaped upon him: nevertheless, if we can, in any other way, satisfactorily account for that which, at the first sight, appears to cast merited blame upon him, let us not, by unjust imputations, seek to bring him down from his high eminence, merely that he may less offend our self-love by appearing more nearly related to the common clay of which men are made.

"The conduct of Alfred," says Mr Turner, "in the first years of his reign, seems to have been imprudent. While acting with his brother," (Ethelred) "he was energetic and indefatigable; but, after he became possessed of the crown himself, instead of a system of vigilance and vigour against his enemies, we find nothing but inert quietude, temporising pacifications, and transient armaments. The only plan discernible in the first seven years of his reign, was to gain momentary repose. An interval of tranquillity was certainly obtained, but it was a delusive slumber on the precipice of fate."

The censure implied in these few sentences

is considerably modified as Mr Turner proceeds: there are, nevertheless, some considerations, and, as it appears to us, weighty ones, which seem to have escaped him. Alfred is charged here with an imbecility which would sacrifice everything for the sake of momentary repose: let us reflect a little upon the subject.

Before we blame him for anxiously seeking repose, we ought to make a careful examination of all the motives that could influence him in the pursuit of it. To seek for peace at a slight sacrifice is almost always commendable: and to purchase it at nearly the greatest may sometimes be wise. The alternative must first be weighed, before a judgment can be passed upon the propriety of any course of action. Things which in themselves appear to be either right or wrong, may, in relation to other things, become the reverse. It is admitted that, while acting with his brother, Alfred was energetic and indefatigable against his enemies: *were there then, after his accession to the throne, any considerations that could demand a different course of policy?*

We have seen that, in a few months preced-

ing the death of Ethelred, the West Saxons had sustained eight pitched battles, besides incessant skirmishes, against an enemy whose numbers were perpetually recruited : that, within a month after Alfred's accession, another battle had been fought ; that the strength of Wessex was exhausted, and that the king sought for, and succeeded in procuring, a peace. Now, as long as this peace was observed by his enemies, would it have been his policy to break it ?

What was *his* strength,—and what was *theirs ?*

West Saxony constituted but a small portion of the island ; and all the remainder was under the power of the Northmen. The number of these, it is true, bore but a small proportion to the whole number of the population ; but a very large one to the number of any military force that could be brought against them. The Saxon had to support *war ;*—the Northman made war support *him :* the latter found supplies in money and provisions wherever he moved,—the former had to accumulate these from his own resources before he could move at all. The Dane, in separate hordes, each under its own chief, could

at pleasure make his attack, by sea or by land, upon whatever point of the frontier he chose,—but it was impossible that the Saxon could maintain every where a force capable of instantly opposing him.

Against an enemy so terrible, and possessing such advantages, would it have been prudent in Alfred to have sustained a ruinous war, while he could have remained at peace?

Had his strength and resources been equal to the contest, undoubtedly it would have been his truest policy to have pursued it as long as there remained an enemy in the island. But, how must that contest have been supported? Had he succeeded in utterly driving them from Wessex, they would have retired to other, and distant, parts of the island, whither he must have pursued them; or to their ships, from which they might the next day have made descent upon other points; whither again he must have followed them, to be again disappointed.

Before taxing Alfred with imbecility for seeking to maintain peace, it ought to have been proved that he possessed power to support *such*

a war. But this has never been attempted. Neither the population, nor the resources of Wessex would have been equal to it. Instead of blaming Alfred for seeking repose, it would perhaps have been far more proper to have extolled him for preserving his own little kingdom in tranquillity and freedom, during a time when all the rest of the island was plundered and enslaved. It is evident that, against an enemy such as we have described, there could be no real and permanent security for Wessex but by utterly expelling them from the island, and preventing their return. This would have demanded large armies, ample resources, and a navy of a most formidable power. Were such means within the reach of the small kingdom of Wessex, comprising, as in truth it did, but a few of the southern counties? Assuredly not. All, therefore, which remained for her monarch to do, was to preserve her from war, and to increase her strength to resist that war when it should be forced upon her.

Now, in what does the strength of a nation consist? The question would require for its full

examination volumes where we can allow but lines. It may, however, be briefly answered, that the strength of a nation consists in its population, its wealth, its intellect, and the power which it has of combining all its resources for the attainment of its purpose. These conditions appear mainly dependent upon the nature of its government. Under a good government, population and wealth will increase; the separate parts of which a nation is composed will be united in one body; and an impulse be given to the whole, which will have a power far greater than that of its parts reckoned individually. A bad system of government,—always including under this term the whole constitution of a state, —will have an effect directly the reverse of all this. If, therefore, Alfred could best strengthen his kingdom by the improvement of its constitution, to that object ought his strenuous endeavours to have been directed. Had he persisted in war, population and wealth must have been wasted, and all attempts at constitutional improvement must have been suspended; and might perhaps have been ultimately abandoned.

It would be impossible here to enter into a full examination of the political state of Wessex, to point out the sources of her internal weakness, or to shew all the evils which her king had to remedy. To prove that her political constitution was not the best calculated for improving her resources, or for giving to her government all the advantage of the strength which she possessed, it may suffice to mention the two facts, that her kings, though presumed to be hereditary, were frequently elected by her nobles, and that a large portion of her population were slaves. This at once implies innumerable evils: a king with inefficient authority, and of course a divided country; an aristocracy of almost uncontrolled power, and, consequently, a band of despots, proud, fierce, and quarrelsome among themselves; cruel and oppressive to all beneath them; and, lastly, a defective law, a people poor, ignorant, and brutalized. This was not a state best fitted to give to a kingdom prosperity; or to its resources, such as they were, the most advantageous scope. Alfred, therefore, sought for repose, that he might

at once preserve his country from the miseries and ruin of war, and devote himself to her improvement, her happiness, and her strength. Surely such a line of conduct was far wiser than the pursuit of a war which must almost inevitably have been ruinous to his country, and could not, however successful, have ensured to her a permanent tranquillity.

But when, after five years of peace he was again attacked, was he right again to negociate for peace, and to purchase with money the departure of the enemy?

We may remark, first, that there is no evidence of these invaders being the same who had formerly made peace with him; secondly, that the charge of his having purchased their departure with money is, we believe, to be found in one writer only, Ethelwerd; thirdly, that the fact of their having, as all writers agree, bound themselves, by their most sacred oaths, to quit the kingdom, seems to imply,—and more especially since the treaty immediately followed a naval engagement in which they had been de-

feated—that such conditions were, to a certain degree, forced upon them.

"But," says Mr Turner, "in a night quickly succeeding the peace-making solemnity, they rushed clandestinely on the king's forces, and slew all his horsemen. They used their steeds to mount a part of their army, which rode immediately to Exeter, and remained there for the winter." Here again we must observe the want of evidence that these were the same who had so lately negociated with Alfred. For aught that appears to the contrary, they may have been an entirely new body, who, having disembarked for plunder, came upon, and slew the horsemen: and Alfred, under this supposition, is not so open to censure for having afterwards taken oaths and hostages from them at Exeter. To have trusted to the oaths of the same men who had so lately violated them, would certainly have argued in him a blameable weakness. But, it must never be forgotten that these invaders were not to be considered as subjects of *one power*, and consequently bound together by the terms of *one treaty*, but that they were, in truth,

piratical hordes, each independent of the rest, and each restrained by its own particular bond alone. The obscurity of the history of this period is indeed such, that an absolute reliance can scarcely ever be placed upon it. That the Danes who slew the horsemen, and seized Exeter, may have been quite distinct from those with whom Alfred had before negociated, and that, possibly, the space of nearly a year may have elapsed between the two events, seems probable enough even from Mr Turner's account. He says, page 50, vol. ii. 3d edit. "The three kings who *had wintered* at Cambridge, began their hostilities against Wessex, &c.;"—and yet, at page 52, he tells us, that the invaders who had slain the horsemen, "rode immediately to Exeter, and *remained there for the winter.*" Here, at all events, they were attacked by Alfred, and compelled, after taking oaths, and giving hostages, to depart. In the paragraph immediately preceding this, Mr Turner had informed us, that the fleet of Alfred had attacked that of the Northmen, who, "half-ruined already by a stormy voyage, waged a fruitless battle: their hosts perished, and of their

steeds of the ocean, to adopt their favourite metaphor, 120 were destroyed at the rock of Swanwick, on the coast of Hampshire."

Now in all this conduct of Alfred there does not appear anything like an imbecility which sought only "to gain a momentary repose." He seems, on the contrary, to have dealt with such an enemy, or, rather, such a series of enemies, in the only way that he could, by opposing them whenever they attacked him, and by preserving the country in peace, that it might be gathering strength for war, when that evil should be no longer avoidable.

At length, however, the formidable invasion of Godrun took place: and the country was, apparently, quite unprepared to meet it. "On this decisive invasion," says Mr Turner, page 54, Vol. ii. "the country found itself so unprotected, from whatever cause, that many of the inhabitants emigrated in penury and terror to other regions. Some fled over sea, and to France; the rest, overawed by the cavalry of the invaders, submitted to their dominion, and Alfred himself was compelled to become a fugi-

tive. These circumstances, which every chronicle states or implies, are so extraordinary, that it is difficult to comprehend them. The Danes invade Wessex; the country falls undefended into their hands, and Alfred preserves his life by such a concealment, that his friends were as ignorant as his enemies both of his residence and fate. Such became his distress that he knew not where to turn; such was his poverty that he had no subsistence but that which by furtive or open plunder he could extort, not merely from the Danes, but even from those of his subjects who submitted to their government; or by fishing and hunting obtain. He wandered about in woods and marshes in the greatest penury, with a few companions; sometimes, for greater secrecy, alone. He had neither territory, nor, for a time, the hope of regaining any. To find Alfred and the country in this distress, and at the same time to remark that no battles are mentioned to have occurred between the arrival of the Northmen at Chippenham, and the flight of the king, or the subjection of the country, are circumstances peculiarly perplexing. It is not stated on this in-

vasion, as it is on every other, that Alfred collected an army, and resisted the Northmen; that he retired at the head of his forces, though defeated; that he posted himself in any fortress, or that he took any measures to defend the country against its enemies. They invade in January; between that month and the following Easter, a very short period, all this disaster occurred.

The power of the Danes may have been formidable, but it had never been found by Alfred to be irresistible; and the events of a few months proved that it was easily assailable. When they attacked his brother, they met with a resistance which has been recorded. When they attacked himself in the preceding years, his means of opposition, though not vigorous, are yet noticed. But on this invasion a most remarkable silence occurs as to any measures of defence. As far as we can penetrate into such an obscured incident, we can discern none; nothing appears but panic and disaffection in the people; inactivity and distress in the king. To suppose that the Northmen surprised him by a rapid move-

ment into Wessex is no diminution of the difficulty, because they had been eight years in the island, moving about as they pleased; and often with celerity for the purpose of easier victory. Rapidity of motion was, indeed, a part of their usual tactics, both in England and in France; and not to have prepared against an event that was always possible, and always impending over him, impeaches both the judgment and the patriotism of the king at this period of peril. Before Alfred, from a respected sovereign, would have become a miserable fugitive, we should expect to read of many previous battles; of much patriotic exertion corresponding with his character and dignity, and the duties of his station, and worthy of his intellect. If defeated in one country, we should look for him in another; always with an army, or in a fortress; always withstanding the fierce enemies who assaulted him. What overwhelmed Alfred with such distress?"

We have made this long extract because it fairly states all the difficulties of the question. Mr Turner proposes to solve them by the sup-

position that Alfred, through some misconduct, had alienated from himself the love of his subjects; and, in consequence thereof, had, at this trying emergency, been deserted by them. The nature of this misconduct is wholly unknown: and the evidence of it rests solely upon a few passages in the writings of Asser, the contemporary and friend of Alfred,—in a Saxon life of St Neot, written a hundred years after the death of the king, probably by Elfric,—in a Latin life of the same saint, written two hundred years later, by an abbot of Croyland,—in two others, one in prose, and one in verse, written by Ramsay, also in the twelfth century;—and in the books of Matthew of Westminster, and John of Tinmouth, who wrote in the fourteenth century.

Those who know the tendency of the human mind to invent, to misunderstand, to exaggerate, to distort, will not be disposed to rely implicitly upon the assertion of any writer. It is in the concurring evidence of many, and credible, and impartial, authorities only, that we are justified in placing confidence. Where a fact,

extraordinary in itself, and implying something very contradictory to other, and better supported, facts, is presented to us, we are not blameable in refusing our assent to it. Every *known* fact in the life of Alfred bespeaks a mind of the highest order of intellect, and of virtue. Man is a fickle and erring creature, it is true, but we must not therefore admit him to be guilty of all inconsistencies that, on light authorities, may be urged against him. In his very inconsistencies, the individual is generally somewhat consistent. He may possess qualities apparently very incongruous; but he can never, we believe, either at the same, or at another, period of his life, possess such as are utterly opposite. He may, at one time, be wholly devoted to pleasure, and, at another, be absorbed in study or in business: he may in his youth be extravagant, and in his old age be penurious, but we do not believe that the really *generous* mind will ever become *sordid*, nor the sordid mind generous: we cannot believe that he, who by his wickedness and injustice had alienated from him the affections of a whole people, so as in his need

to be utterly deserted by them, could, in a few months, or years, after, become the acknowledged model of piety, of wisdom, and of uprightness. All that is good in man may be improved, or deteriorated,—all that is bad may be amended, or made worse: but vice does not change to virtue, nor virtue to vice: man cannot, like the poles of a magnet, by some electrical shock of prosperity, or of adversity, be made to point *wholly* and *constantly* to the very opposite of that which first attracted him. Alfred, from an impulse of passion, or from an error in judgment, may have committed single acts of injustice, but he could not, during seven years, have been systematically indolent, and unjust, and, during the remainder of his life, an unchanging exemplar of industry and integrity.

The incongruities, and fickleness, of the human character afford ample room for dispute upon such a question, and much might be said in explanation, and modification, of our assertion; but neither the time, nor the nature of the present work, will admit of farther disquisition upon that point. Those who may be in-

clined to contend for the possibility of an utter change, even, as it were, in the very nature of any individual mind, will yet allow that nothing but the most indisputable evidence can demand our belief in any given instance of it. Yet, in the case of Alfred, if we give credit to such a total revolution of character, it must be upon evidence the most slight and unsupported. Of the books above-mentioned, that of Asser alone appears worthy of attention. For others, written a hundred, three hundred, and five hundred years, after the death of the king, and referring to no earlier, and weighty authorities, much deference cannot be expected.

Now, it must be remembered that no *act* of wickedness or oppression is related by Asser, or by any other writer: a vague and general charge alone is made. The words of Asser, which Mr Turner deems so important, are as follows: "We believe that this adversity occurred to the king *not undeservedly*. Because in the first part of his reign, when he was a young man, and governed by a youthful mind; when the men of his kingdom and his subjects came to

him and besought his aid in their necessities; when they who were depressed by the powerful, implored his aid and patronage; he would not hear them, nor afford them any assistance, but treated them as of no estimation."

It is plainly impossible to form any judgment upon the propriety of Alfred's conduct in this respect, unless we could have a distinct knowledge of the merits of the cases in which he is said to have refused his assistance. The king, as first magistrate of the country, refuses his "aid and patronage" to certain petitioners;—but, is it so very uncommon for a magistrate to reject, as frivolous, or unsupported, the claims of those who think themselves "depressed by the powerful?" And who, in utter ignorance of the facts of such cases, would venture to pronounce an opinion upon his conduct?

Again, it must be remembered that this refusal of justice *to the weak*, is brought forward as a reason why he should have been deserted by his subjects. Now, if he were so deserted, for any fault in himself, it must have been by the nobles, under whom the people were almost

passive instruments: but the injustice said to have been shown to the weak, would inevitably have been viewed as a favour toward the strong, and could not, therefore, have been regarded by them as a wickedness gross enough to alienate them from him.

It must be a great tyranny indeed that can estrange from a king the affections of a whole people; and, had such been the case with Alfred, surely we should have heard more of it than is contained in so vague a charge. But the attachment of a few nobles may easily be lost; and that without any very great crime on the part of their king. An attempt to restrain their injustice, or to enlighten their ignorance, might have sufficed to accomplish this.

Asser afterwards continues. "The Lord permitted him to be very often wearied by his enemies, afflicted by adversity, and to be depressed by the contempt of his people." ..... "Wherefore he fell often into such misery, that none of his subjects knew where he was, or what had befallen him."

It is not easy to understand this. If by "his

enemies," be meant the Northmen, we can hardly admit the expression "*often* wearied," since we have heard of but three aggressions on their part: if by "his enemies," be meant the nobles, we must then, as before, suppose that his crime could not have been a disregard of the cries of the weak against those very oppressors: and, if we believe that he was "depressed by the contempt of his people,"—how can we account for the negligence of historians in not having recorded one single fact of so monstrous a tyranny as must have existed before he could have incurred such general contempt? If again, he fell *often* into such misery that none of his subjects knew where he was, or what had befallen him,"—can it be credited that a creature so weak and despised would have been permitted to remain upon his throne, when there still existed the same haughty and powerful aristocracy that had deposed his father, and proclaimed himself king, at the very time when there existed, in the children of his elder brother, legitimate heirs to the throne? Alfred had been elected in preference to any of the sons of Ethelbald, because these were too

young to fill the arduous post;—but, betwixt that period and the great invasion of the Danes, seven years had elapsed: and Athelwold, the eldest, might then have attained to at least the same age as that of Alfred at the time when the nobles had judged *him* competent to wield the sceptre. Had Alfred been really the universally despised creature pictured by Asser, would no attempt have been made to place Athelwold, the rightful monarch, upon his throne?

That Alfred may have been wrongly estimated, and disliked, by the proud and ignorant aristocracy, and that he may, at one conjuncture, have been deserted by nobles, and by subjects, is likely enough, and is true: but, if all this may be satisfactorily accounted for upon other grounds, why should we, upon such meagre authority as remains to us, ascribe this dislike, and this desertion, to his vice and injustice, when all the known facts of his life attest his piety, his benevolence, his wisdom, his perfect integrity, his unremitting labours for the welfare and the happiness of his people?

That Alfred, in his younger days, may occa-

sionally have given way to the passions of youth, is probable enough; but it is also probable that petty faults may have been regarded by his accusers as heinous crimes. Asser was a bishop, and St Neot was a monk: and, without any great uncharitableness, such persons may be supposed to have regarded with undue severity every action which their rigid notions condemned; to have censured as crime, that which more lenient judges might have called weakness; to have blamed as tyranny, that which others, more enlightened, might have named strict justice only.

When weighed against all the *known* actions of the king, we cannot allow much importance to the undefined charges made against him in the lives of St Neot, written at the distance of a hundred, three hundred, and five hundred years, from his death: and we may, furthermore, remark, that there appears in these something like an attempt to make the king a sinner, merely that the monk may appear a prophet. In the earlier life of St Neot, attributed to Elfric, we find the following words put into the mouth of the monk, whom his biographer has to represent as a seer,

and a saint. Addressing the king, St Neot is made thus to chide him. "O king! much shalt thou suffer in this life; hereafter so much distress thou shalt abide, that no man's tongue may say it all. Now, loved child, hear me if thou wilt, and turn thy heart to my counsel. Depart entirely from thine unrighteousness, and thy sins with alms redeem, and with tears abolish."

In the Latin life of St Neot, written by the Abbot of Croyland, the same desire to assert the prophetic power of the saint is evident. St Neot, reprimanding the king, is made to say: "Why do you glory in your misconduct? Why are you powerful but in iniquity? You have been exalted, but you shall not continue; you shall be bruised like the ears of wheat; where then will be your pride? If that is not yet excluded from you, it soon shall be. You shall be deprived of that very sovereignty of whose vain splendour you are so extravagantly arrogant."

It is likely enough that the rigid monk, a near relation to the king,—probably indeed his elder brother,—and relying upon the privilege of that relationship, may have freely censured in him all

which he thought wrong, and have warned him generally of the consequence;—but, it was sufficiently easy for his biographers, some centuries after the event, to make him prophecy the specific misfortune which fell upon him. If, then, we bear in mind the character, and the probable views of the biographers of the king, and of the saint, we shall scarcely deem their accusations worthy of much notice, opposed as these are to the whole undisputed actions of our illustrious monarch. Matthew of Westminster, and John of Tinmouth cannot be considered as authorities at all, since they are evidently mere copyists from Ramsay, and the Abbot of Croyland.

But though we may wholly reject, as frivolous, or unsupported, the charges brought against Alfred's conduct, there still remains unaccounted for the fact of his having been at one time utterly deserted by his subjects. In a conjecture of Mr Turner's upon one cause of this we perfectly agree: and shall take the liberty of stating it in his own words. At p. 66, Vol. ii. third edition, after supposing that Alfred had estranged from him the love of his people, he proceeds

to account for it thus. "In considering this subject, we must, in justice to Alfred, remember, that all his errors were confined to the first part of his reign, and were nobly amended. It is also fair to state, that the imputed neglect of his people must not be hastily attributed to a tyrannical disposition, because it may be referred to circumstances which better suit his authentic character. It may have arisen from the intellectual disparity between himself and his people. When men begin to acquire knowledge, they sometimes encourage a haughty self-opinion, a craving fondness for their favourite pursuit, and an irritable impatience of every interruption. This hurtful temper, which disappears as the judgment matures, may have accompanied Alfred's first acquisitions of knowledge; and such feelings could only be exasperated, when the duties of his office called him from his studies and meditations into a world of barbarians, who despised books and bookmen, with whom his mind could have no point of contact, whose ignorance provoked his contempt, and whose habits, perhaps, excited his abhorrence. Begin-

ning to meditate, in his private hours, on the illustrious ancients whom he had heard of, his mind aspired to be assimilated to theirs, and could only loath the rude, martial, and ignorant savages who filled his court, claimed his time, and oppressed his kingdom. Dependant and noble were alike fierce, uninstructed, and gross. How could his emerging mind compare the exalted characters and depicted civilization of Greece and Rome, or the sweet and interesting virtues inculcated by Christianity, without an indignation, impatience, and misanthropy, which call for our compassion, rather than our reproach! How could he have imbibed an ardent intellectual taste, and have thereby possessed the increasing love of the great, the beautiful, and the good, without being affected by the melancholy contrast between his studies and his experience! Every one who has struggled into taste and knowledge amid the impediments of uncongenial connections and occupations, will have felt, in his own experience, something of that temper of mind which, in circumstances somewhat

analogous, seems at first to have actuated Alfred."

That Alfred *must* have felt his intellectual superiority to almost all around him; and that his energetic character, in seeking to point out to them the means of mental improvement, may have given great, and perhaps unneeded, offence to his "fierce, uninstructed, and gross nobles," is a supposition far more probable, we think, than that a mind like his could ever have disgusted, and alienated from him, a whole people, by sensual indulgence, and tyranny. But there are other reasons, which of themselves would, we are inclined to think, be quite sufficient to account for the short seclusion of the king from his people. Highly probable we have admitted it to be that among his nobles many may have disliked, and misunderstood him; and that, from the misrepresentations of these, many of the inferior classes also may have been estranged from him; but it appears from the event that, whatsoever may have been the cause of this partial unpopularity, the dislike could not have been very deeply rooted. If they suddenly deserted

him, yet, by the acknowledgment of all, they as suddenly returned, for life or for death, to stand by his side. This does not argue him to have been either the abhorred tyrant, or the pitiful creature "very often depressed by the contempt of his people." Perhaps a few brief and simple reflections may assist us to a more correct opinion; or may, at the least, furnish a hint upon which abler, and less restricted, pens may work, and with a better result than can be hoped for by the writer of an ephemeral tale.

When divested of all the mystery and the exaggeration of historians, the simple truth seems to be neither more nor less than this,—that the Northmen made a sudden and formidable invasion of Wessex,—that the people were seized with a panic which made many fly to other countries, and the rest submit at once to the enemy,—that the king, seeing no hope of arousing them to immediate resistance, and, probably, dreading treachery in those who had acknowledged the government of the Danes, concealed himself—and of course with considerable personal privation and hardship—till the panic had

subsided: that he then gradually gathered round him those who had courage and patriotism enough to dare the terrible enemy,—and that, when he found himself equal to the contest, he marched against the invader, and vanquished him.

This, it may be replied, is a simple and feasible tale enough, but, if Alfred were, at the time of this invasion, the wise, brave, and good man that, at a later period of his life, he is acknowledged to have been, how can you explain away the fact, that the country was left wholly without defence, and this, too, at a time when an aggression of the Northmen might have been at any moment expected?

Mr Turner's remark upon this apparent negligence has been already given: and yet it is singular that, with his extensive knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon history, laws, and customs, he should have taken such a view. "Not to have prepared," we repeat his concluding words,—"not to have prepared against an event that was always possible, and always impending over him, impeaches *both the judgment and the patriot-*

ism of the king, at this period of peril." In our humble view, it was precisely because "the event *was always* possible, and *always* impending over him,"—but, *always uncertain*,—that he could *not* prepare against it.

There is no evidence that, at the moment when the great invasion of Godrun actually took place, it ought to have been more expected than at any other moment. The peace which Alfred had made with the *main* body of the Northmen had lasted during seven years; yet the enemy had been all that time in the island, "moving about," to use the words of Mr Turner, "as they pleased; and often with celerity for the purpose of easier victory." We have indeed thought proper to make our Earl of Somerset, and others, anticipate an attack, and blame the king for negligence, but the peculiar views of any of the characters of a tale must not be considered as those of the author, or be examined upon any ground except that of their fitness to such a character. If, then, the day of attack could not be foreknown, if, as was indeed the case, it were quite uncertain whether any attack at all were in contemplation,

Alfred is not more censurable for having been unprepared for it on the day in question, than at any other day of the seven preceding years. The alternative was, either *always* to have his army in the field, or *never*, until the immediate occasion demanded it. Now Mr Turner's own words will show that, according to the military customs and laws of the Anglo-Saxons, the former was impracticable. A standing army never existed in England till centuries later : no Saxon king had the right, or the *power*, to maintain such ; and no Saxon subjects would have permitted the attempt. Even during an actual campaign, the attendance of the soldiery could not be compelled beyond the defined period. An extract or two from Mr Turner will show this. At page 200, vol. 3d. he says. " But all the prerogatives and rights of the Anglo-Saxon cyning (king) were definite and ascertained. They were such as had become established by law or custom, and could be as little exceeded by the sovereign, as withheld by his people." Lower down on the same page, he continues—" The military force was under the command of the

king, *while it was assembled.* It was rather a militia than a regular army. We have already given some notices of its nature: from a certain quantity of land, a fixed number of soldiers was sent, when the king summoned his people to an expedition, who were bound to serve under him *for a certain time*, apparently two months. Thus, in Berkshire, 'when the king sent any where his army, one soldier went from every five hides, and for his victuals or his pay every hide gave him four shillings. This money *was not transmitted to the king*, but to the soldiers.'"

These few sentences are sufficient, without any comment, to prove that the king had no power to keep on foot a perpetual military force, even during actual war: how then could he have done this in a time of peace? It was upon some particular occasion only that the king could "summon his people to an expedition;" and their term of service was then limited "to a certain time, apparently two months." Even after Alfred had attained to the sovereignty of all England; and when he was engaged in active war with an enemy far more formidable than the ill disciplin-

ed, and disunited, hordes by whom he had formerly been attacked, he had no power to keep together, beyond the fixed term, the particular army which he commanded. At page 109, vol. 2d, in speaking of the admirable opposition made by Alfred to the invasion of the dreaded Hastings, Mr Turner says: "The plan of Alfred required the aid of time, and *a permanent force*: but the conditions of military service *prevented the Saxon army from being perpetually in the field.* To remedy this inconvenience, which would have robbed him of all the advantages that he projected, Alfred divided his army into two bodies: of these he called one to the warlike campaign, while the individuals of the other were enjoying peaceably their private occupations. After a reasonable service, the active portion was allowed to return home, and the rest quitted their domestic hearths to supply the place of their retiring countrymen. Thus, while he avoided every necessity of rushing to a precipitate attack, he always presented to the invaders a strong and undiminished force. Surprised at this new phenomenon, Hastings and his confederates re-

mained in their camps, disconcerted, coerced, and overawed."

This, be it remembered, was the measure forced upon Alfred, not during a time of doubtful danger, but while the two hostile armies were almost in the very presence of each other, when the king was "encamped with his collected army between the two divisions of the Danes,—the forest on the one side, and waters upon the other, which protected his flanks, and gave security to his encampment."

Here then is ample justification for Alfred against the charge that would "impeach both the judgment and the patriotism of the king" for not having been prepared "against an event that was *always* possible, and *always* impending over him,"—but always uncertain. He had not the power to keep an army ever prepared against the *chances* of attack: and there is no evidence to show that the actual invasion which, for a time, unseated him from the throne, might have been foreseen by him. To see, and not to provide against it, would argue him to be, not a sensualist or a tyrant, but a mere lunatic. *After*

the invasion, and the seizure of Chippenham, we read that "many of the inhabitants emigrated in penury and terror to other regions,"—surely, if the invasion had been certainly foreknown, and the quarter from which it would burst upon them, some such precaution would have been taken *before* that event.

But, although a standing army could not be maintained to protect the kingdom against merely *possible* dangers,—yet was it not so wholly unguarded as might appear to one who would estimate the time and the labour required for calling together an efficient armed force of Anglo-Saxons, by that which would in the present day be demanded. The discipline of a modern army, before it could be fit to contend with an enemy already fully disciplined, would require considerable time, labour, and expense: but the Saxon army needed little discipline to qualify it for an encounter with an enemy who had no discipline at all: and their ranks were not slowly filled by the drum and the enlisting sergeant, but rapidly, and at once, at the summons of the monarch. No new levy of taxes was necessary, every

five hides of land had to furnish its soldier, every hide had its fixed subsidy to pay him. Under such a system, the danger of keeping a threatened country without a permanent military force for its protection was far less than it might at first appear to be. At the time of former invasions the country was equally unprepared, and yet we have seen that efficient opposition was speedily at hand. How was it then, it may be asked, that the invaders were not in the present instance promptly met? Why did the king conceal himself? Why was no army called together?

It appears manifestly from all the histories that the suddenness and the greatness of the invasion had struck a panic upon the people which for a time paralyzed them. "Some fled over the sea, and to France; the rest, overawed by the cavalry of the invaders, submitted to their dominion;" and in consequence of this the power of the king was for a time taken from him; and he had no alternative but to submit with the rest, or to await the time when he might arouse them from their torpor, and strike a blow for

his country. This could only be effected by a temporary concealment, both from his enemies, and from those who might have betrayed to them the secret of his abode. He had then the laborious task of collecting,—not a soldiery whom the authority of the law and of the king *compelled* to render their service,—but a band of those who, for the love of their country and their monarch, would *voluntarily* enroll themselves under him. This, while a powerful and victorious enemy commanded the land, must have been a difficult, and a slow, process: he could rear no standard, issue no proclamation, for his place of refuge would then have been made known to his foes, and the "cavalry who had overawed, and made the people submit to their dominion," would have brought a swift destruction upon him, before he could have had time to gather a strength to oppose them: yet the whole time occupied by this seclusion of the king was less than five months. The invasion took place in January 878, and the great battle in which Alfred wholly crushed the enemy was fought on the 11th of May.

When all these considerations and facts have been well weighed, we incline to believe that, with most of our readers, the marvel will rather be that Alfred should have been so quickly, and so decidedly, successful, than that, for a short time, he should have been compelled to quit his throne, and seek concealment. While the misfortunes of the country and the king may be in any other way accounted for, most unwilling should we be to join in attributing them to the vices, or even to the errors, of a monarch who is perhaps the proudest boast of our history.

Absurdities, and inconsistencies, in the old historians might easily be dwelt upon, to show how little trust we ought to place in them: but this matter has already occupied too much space in a work like the present; and, if the general considerations here offered to the reader have not disposed him to agree in our views, we could hope for little better success by showing him that the errors incident to all other historians have not been escaped by these. If we have ventured to differ in this question from the opinions of Mr Sharon Turner, it has been with the ut-

most deference to his far greater knowledge: and has been, at the same time, accompanied by the highest esteem for the general spirit of his invaluable work, and sincere gratitude for the benefit that he has conferred by it upon the literary world generally; and, if we may be allowed to add, upon our own humble labours in particular.

The result then, to which we would bring this long,—but, in consideration of the importance of the question, we would hope not tiresome, disquisition is,—that the calamitous state of West Saxony, which will be briefly sketched in the next chapter, was not the consequence of vice, or error in her king, but of the peculiar laws, customs, and circumstances of the country, on the one hand, and, on the other, of the peculiar habits and mode of warfare of those against whom she had to contend.

One other cause we shall venture to assign for the temporary inactivity of the king, and the consequent panic which seized upon his people;—and it is, we think, a cause so likely to have been a true one, although it has never, as far as we are

aware, been made part of the conjectures of any historian, that we do not think much apology can be necessary for our having recourse to it. We allude to a sudden exacerbation of that terrible disease to which the king had, from the time of his marriage, been a martyr; and which was of a nature so subduing, that the marvel is far greater how he could ever have made any active exertions at all, than that, at certain times, he should have been compelled to suspend them. Hear Mr Turner's account of this frightful and immitigable scourge.

"It attacked him, before all the people, suddenly, with an immense pain, during, and probably caused by, the protracted banquets, day and night, of his nuptial festivities; and *never left him*. Its seat was internal and invisible; but its agony was incessant. Such was the dreadful anguish it perpetually produced, that, if for one short hour it happened to intermit, the dread and horror of its inevitable return poisoned the little interval of ease. The skill of his Saxon physicians was unable to detect its nature, or to alleviate its pain. Alfred had to endure it unrelieved. It

is not among the least admirable circumstances of this extraordinary man, that he withstood the fiercest hostilities that ever distressed a nation, cultivated literature, discharged his public duties, and executed all his schemes for the improvement of his people, amid a perpetual agony so distressing that it would have disabled a common man from the least exertion." In a note appended to the foregoing passage, page 310, Vol. 2d, Mr Turner conjectures this disorder to have been internal cancer.

That some unusual violence of this fierce disease may have wholly incapacitated the king for exertion at the critical moment of Godrun's invasion, and have thus left the kingdom for a time almost without a governor, and in consequent confusion, and terror, and helplessness, might, we think, be allowed to the serious conjecture of even a grave historian. To an humble novel writer it cannot therefore be refused. But, may it not also considerably invalidate the assertions of those who would bring against our illustrious monarch the charge of luxury and sensuality? Assuredly it may. A man undergoing the tor-

ture is not very often troubled by the importunities of appetite. But enough:—we have made bold to take our own views of the question; and shall now proceed with our story.

CHAPTER IV.

The gloomiest anticipations of Earl Ethelbert seemed at length on the verge of fulfilment, though from a quarter in which he had not expected the storm to burst.

On the evening of the third day of Edmund's visit, a horseman, who had ridden all the night and all the day, brought from Egbert, the Earl of Wilts, intelligence that the Northmen, under the command of the terrible Godrun, had, on the day previous, entered Wessex with a force of cavalry and foot such as they had never before brought into the field, had seized upon Chippenham, and put all that resisted to the sword. The whole country, the messenger added, was in confusion and dismay; and he himself had narrowly escaped from the horsemen of the Danes, who were scouring the ways, plundering, burning, and slaughtering, wherever they moved. Of the

king nothing was as yet known; but Earl Egbert hoped that he would speedily be at the head of his army, or the country would be irretrievably lost.

Such was the substance of the message; and it came like a thunder-clap upon all who heard it. Through the bosom of Edmund it shot a thrill such as he had never before felt; and, with a vividness that surprised him, brought before his mental sight the dreadful scenes of his boyhood. The faces of the ferocious Northmen seemed actually to glare upon him, and their horrid shouts again to ring in his ear. But, of all, came upon him, with the intensest feeling of reality, the figure, the savage look, and the roar of the gigantic Hubbo, as he hewed down the venerable abbot at the altar. The majestic form of the nobler Sidroc stood also before him; and the golden-haired Aslauga, severe, and yet gentle, in her beauty. Often had he, in his younger days, recalled to memory the scenes of blood and of peril through which he had passed; but, as he approached toward manhood, these had gradually lost their hold upon him; and seemed at length

almost like the remembrance of some fearful dream. Now, however, they suddenly blazed again upon him; and he felt an emotion which told him that the time was not far distant when he must again, but under circumstances very different, find himself in the presence of the terrible warriors, who had for years appeared to his excited imagination rather as demons escaped from hell, than as mere earthly barbarians. He spake no word as he received the intelligence from Sigifred, who, with face of terror, hasted from the apartment of his father to communicate the dreadful tidings to his mother and sister: the book, from which he was reading aloud, stirred not in his hand,—but he drew a deep and long breath; and his right hand unconsciously moved toward his sword hilt. Cyneburga answered with a faint shriek the tidings; and Elfrida grew pallid and faint.

The whole castle became soon a scene of hurry and alarm. Messengers were dispatched in every direction to procure stores of provision, and to invite to the castle those who might be disposed to receive its protection, and, at the same time,

to increase its strength. Armour and weapons were got in readiness for the instant use of those who might need them; and every preparation was made against a probable assault.

Edmund was actively employed with the Earl and Sigifred; and, during several hours of the night, was engaged in penning, under the dictation of Ethelbert, letters to such of the Earl's friends as might have the means of decyphering them. He had, however, found more than once an opportunity to speak a few words of comfort and encouragement to Elfrida, from whom he, nevertheless, felt that he was about to be, as it were for ages, separated. Till this day, he had not been fully aware of the intensity of the love which linked his very existence to hers; and, though sufficiently conscious of the delight which he took in her presence and conversation, had not known that, to part wholly and for ever from her, would be to him more bitter than the death agony. In times of danger reserve is thrown aside; and a moment may discover, in our own breasts or in those of others, secrets unknown to all, and

which, in more tranquil periods, might have remained for years concealed. The look, the voice, the intense anxiety, with which Elfrida learned from Edmund his intention to join the army of the king so soon as the summons was issued, betrayed to the youth that which his own fervid language and expression had first betrayed to Elfrida: both felt suddenly that each was to the other more than a delightful acquaintance, merely, that soul was bound to soul, and that the tie could not without torture be severed. Yet not a word was there breathed of love; heart discoursed with heart,—but the tongue interpreted not between them.

A night of strange and conflicting sensations was that to Elfrida, and the beams of day returned to her eyes before she had closed them for the slumber of the night. With Edmund the hours passed on like mingled sunshine and tempest. An undefined dread of the fierce enemy whom he might soon meet, and a thirst of retributive vengeance for the crimes they had perpetrated,—fears for his country,—alarms for all who were dear to him,—intense anxiety for

her whom he now felt to be of all by far most dear,—and a maddening torture, when he reflected upon the fate that might possibly await her,—such were the thoughts, and the emotions that, as with a tempest's fury, agitated his bosom; —but, through all, there shone afar off, like the sunshine upon some happy Goshen, the calm and beautiful light which came from the serene heaven of Elfrida's love. Amid all the horrors of the battle into which his imagination bore him, —amid strife, and blood, wounds, agony, and ghastly death, there seemed to be for ever a sweet voice whispering to his soul that he loved, and was loved again. Beyond that happiness his thoughts as yet did not wander: he built in the air no marriage castles,—pictured to himself no splendid scenes of future wealth or greatness, which such a mutual attachment might create for him;—neither did he dread the opposition of friends, or rivals, nor scheme how to defeat enmity, and to ensure success;—the simple consciousness of loving, and being loved, was bliss enough,—he enjoyed it amid the storm of his other emotions, and brooded over it as, amid

danger and suffering, a fond mother broods over the infant at her breast. Amid the hurry of the evening, the one delightful feeling had never left him,—it was with him during the toil of the night hours,—it accompanied him to his late rest; and cheered the horror of his morning dream. When he awoke, it beamed like a bright sunshine upon him; and he hasted from his couch that he might look upon the countenance of her who was now become to him as a second heaven.

Elfrida was alone when he descended to the breakfast apartment. She stood, pale, and with a tearful eye, in the recess of a window: the light shone full upon her: her face was lifted toward the sky,—her hands were pressed together,—and, by the slight motion of her lips, and the expression of her countenance, she appeared to be in prayer. Edmund approached her gently,—but as yet she saw him not. He drew so near that a few words of her whispered supplication became audible to him: he thought her prayer was for himself;—a deep sigh escaped him,—she caught the sound,—started with agitation,—saw him,—involuntarily advanced,—and in a

moment each was pressed in the arms of the other.

But it was for a moment only. Blushing, and sobbing, Elfrida instantly drew back; sank upon a couch,—covered her face with her hands,—and burst into an agony of tears. A deep flush shot over the countenance of Edmund also: he also withdrew abashed from his sudden and overbold embrace. His, however, was not the pain of self-reproaching modesty, but the dread of having inflicted pain upon that of one far dearer to him than self. For a short time, he stood silent, and confused, looking upon the beautiful creature whose distress, though it touched his very soul, he knew not how to alleviate. But the voice of the Earl, speaking aloud and hurriedly as he advanced through the long and echoing passage which led from the eastern portico, startled him; and, for the first time in his life, he had an undefined sensation that resembled the fear of guilt. He dreaded to be seen, and yet he was not conscious of having done wrong. He felt instinctively that his unusual emotion must have marked its character

upon his look, speech, and manner,—that an open explanation of it would be impossible — and to speak other than the truth, an utter self-degradation. Till this day his heart had been as a book wherein all might read who chose to open it. but there was now one leaf suddenly sealed up ; and, in the first moment, he felt as if concealment were necessarily the same with criminality. He was not yet sufficiently acquainted with the ways of men, and the tortuous windings of the human heart, to know the point at which needful caution ends, and dissimulation begins : he felt a sensation, new, and humbling to his free and candid spirit ; and he thought that it must be the apprehensiveness of guilt.

This feeling, however, though requiring many words fully to depict it to others, was in him the birth of an instant : and the impulse that rose with it was an eager desire to escape at once from a meeting with the Earl, and a probable inquiry which he could neither satisfy nor evade. Yet to leave Elfrida without some notice or apology, however brief, was impossible,—and he was moving hastily toward her, when she also,

startled at the voice of her father with feelings like his, arose to quit the apartment, and avoid inquiries, which, no more than her self-reproaching lover, she could have answered either with the truth or with equivocation. In turning round, she met Edmund, and slightly started. Her face, which, the instant before, had been crimsoned with blushes, was now pale, and covered with tears. As she passed hastily by him, Edmund ventured to press her hand, and to whisper "forgive me." She was gone from him before the words were finished; and there was no return to his pressure. He watched her to the door of an inner chamber; but she turned not, and spake not to him: her head was bowed,—her left hand was pressed to her heart,—her sobs appeared to convulse her. She disappeared, and closed the door. Edmund, with a heavy sigh, quitted the room, at the opposite side; and had just reached the passage that led past the Basilica, on his way to the garden, when he heard the voices of the Earl and of Sigifred behind him, at the moment of their entering the Cavædium to pass into the breakfast chamber.

Having reached the garden, and composed his spirits during a short walk, he thought it necessary to hasten back. He was received as usual by the family; but Elfrida did not appear at the table. Active duties occupied him with the Earl and Sigifred, till the usual time for the mid-day meal: and when he repaired with them to the board he had the happiness to find that Elfrida was there. Though pale and thoughtful, she appeared tolerably composed; and, though she did not with her usual openness enter into conversation, yet neither did she actually shun it. Few words, however, were exchanged betwixt her and Edmund, for both felt themselves constrained to adopt a manner which seemed to them too much like dissimulation. Their silence might have passed unheeded, for there was gloomy anxiety over all; but this alteration of look and behaviour did not escape the watchful eye of Sigifred; and his growing coldness towards Edmund shewed itself more than usual in the progress of the day. This was not unnoticed by the latter; but its true cause remain-

ed unknown to him, and he attributed it to fretfulness, or to anxiety.

A brief opportunity for mutual explanation offered itself in the course of the afternoon; and Edmund had the pleasure to find that he had not, past forgiveness, offended Elfrida,—while she felt equal satisfaction in the assurance that Edmund had not wrongfully interpreted her sudden and involuntary impulse.

The castle began now every hour to receive new accessions of men, and of stores; and watchmen were on the topmost walls, looking, from day-break till darkness closed in, for the approach of messengers from the seat of war.

Tidings at length came; but they told of nothing save the ravages of the enemy, the flight of all who could escape from them, and the submission of those who remained. The king was declared to be labouring under a sudden exacerbation of the dreadful malady which, from the period of his marriage-feast, had afflicted him, and to be wholly unequal to any exertion. The succeeding days brought tidings that the Northmen were spreading themselves in every direc-

tion: that Alric, the Bishop of Shireburn—from whom the Earl had, but a few hours before, received a summons to attend the Witenagemot, which he was endeavouring to call together at Dorchester—had been taken and slain,—that Dorchester itself was threatened by a large fleet, which was only kept back by a strong north wind,—that almost all the nobles and thanes of Wilts, Berks, and Hampshire, and the north-eastern parts of Somerset, had submitted to the invaders,—that the king had fled privately, no man knew whither,—and that, finally, the whole country appeared to be irretrievably lost. In less than a week all this disastrous intelligence reached the castle of Maximus; and the terror of its inhabitants, the anger and alarm of the Earl, increased with every new arrival.

"Where is your idiotic king now?"—he would often exclaim,—"Of what use are his pen, and his book, and his wise laws, and his schools, and his religion now? Two score thousand men that could wield the sword, though they had never heard the crackle of the accursed parchment, nor seen the black stroke of the

pen, nor heard of the existence of a single letter, were worth to Wessex more than all the priests and the scholars that ever addled brains in the cloister. A thousand times have I foretold this consequence: the evil is now come upon us; and the dotard will perish with the country that he has fooled and ruined. But here at least shall the barbarians be foiled! The Roman walls shall give them a Roman welcome; and Maximus shall stand like a rock against the storm that has laid waste a kingdom."

The consternation of all was now at its height. Every day the most fearful reports were fabled; and every fact received the most frightful exaggerations. More than a thousand armed men now garrisoned the castle; and every hour an enemy was anticipated. But, though almost every day came reports of cavalry in clouds that swept like hurricanes over the country, yet in the neighbourhood of Maximus Castle no foe had been seen.

In the midst of all this confusion and alarm, the character of Edmund appeared at once to have undergone a striking change. His port

grew majestic and warlike: his gentle voice strong and decided: his look at once daring and serene. Clothed now evermore in complete mail, prompt in counsel, cool in calculating danger, energetic in thought and bearing, he looked the soldier of whom Rome herself might have been proud. The Earl, domineering and violent, held unquestioned sway over all in the castle; but, save Sigifred, there were few among them who would not, youth though he was, have followed Edmund rather as their leader to the field, than the experienced, but haughty, and less trust-inspiring noble. His uncommon personal strength and activity, so essential in the warfare of the time, his great skill in the use of all weapons, his coolness in reasoning, and his energy in action, seemed peculiarly to point him out as the natural leader of brave men. But it was among those whose jealousy could not be piqued by his superiority, that these feelings prevailed. Sigifred, who felt daily the growing ascendancy of Edmund's mind, so unexpected, and apparently so unaccountable, felt also a daily increase of his own dislike toward

him. Against this, in his cooler moments, he struggled hard. He had so much of generous feeling left in him as to know that hitherto Edmund had given him no decided cause for such aversion; yet the native superiority of that youth was galling to his pride; and his suspicion that there might exist an attachment betwixt the noble Elfrida, and the obscure stranger, worked at times like a poison at his heart. More than once, when agitated by such feelings, and stimulated by wine, he had resolved to make open quarrel with Edmund, and procure his dismissal from the castle: but a personal assault was not rashly to be ventured upon with one whom he well knew to be beyond compare the stronger; and his angry words, designed to provoke reply and quarrel, were always met by a calm and firm, yet conciliating, address, which shamed and controlled him. It was, however, perhaps more to the brother of Elfrida, than to the hot and querulous young noble, that Edmund manifested always this forbearance. Probably, had the offender been any other than such, the impetuosity of Edmund's temperament might have snatch-

ed the reins from his judgment, and the result might have been less happy for both. The proud Earl himself, though demanding from all instant submission to his will, felt conscious of the strength and dignity of Edmund's character; and nothing but the utmost deference to himself could have kept down in him the feeling of jealous pride with which he regarded it.

In remaining during this period of alarm at Maximus Castle, Edmund had to struggle with conflicting feelings. The duty and gratitude which he owed to Leofric, and the less defensive strength of the castle of Cothelstone, prompted him to carry thither his personal assistance; but at such a time to abandon the place in which Elfrida remained, appeared impossible to him. Every day his intimacy with her increased, and their mutual love seemed more inseparably rivetted. Yet even in her he found an approver of the quiet admonitions which duty and gratitude to Leofric whispered: even Elfrida told him that, though his heart might remain at Maximus, yet his arm ought to be with Leofric. The struggle was most pain-

ful to him; but the sense of duty at length prevailed over passion; and he resolved to preserve his integrity, and resign into the hands of God that which he might no longer watch over himself. A faint hope that he might yet, however, reconcile the contending claims upon him by prevailing with Leofric and his family to accept for a time the protection of Maximus Castle, awoke in him; and he instantly sought the Earl, and offered, with his permission, to be the bearer of the message. His proposal met the immediate approbation of Ethelbert: and in an hour after, at the head of twelve armed horsemen, he was spurring upon the road.

He had not, however, neglected to seek an opportunity for bidding a brief farewell, that might be the precursor of perhaps an everlasting separation, to his beloved Elfrida. He found her alone: hastily told her his doubts, and his hopes; impressed, for the first time, a kiss upon her trembling hand,—looked upon her noble, but now pallid, face, with speechless emotion,—commended her to Heaven,—again kissed her hand,—and turned to depart. But

he paused a moment at the door;—he felt as if he could not quit her thus: without a word or a tear, she stood gazing upon him,—but her look expressed unutterable things. There was a dead silence. With heart palpitating violently, he advanced towards her. Her soul seemed issuing from her face. No word was spoken,—but he bent his head, and clasped her in his arms,—pressed upon her lips one fervent kiss,—a moment lingered,—saw on her brow no anger, and no blush;—again pressed her to his bosom,—looked for a brief instant into her speaking eyes,—turned,—waved his hand as he stood at the door,—and, with a heavy sigh, went forth.

Elfrida listened to the clank of his mailed foot, till it died away in the echoing passage; stood motionless then awhile, pale, cold, and silent: burst at length into tears; and hastily retired to the privacy of her own chamber.

The apprehensions of the lovers were, however, in the present instance, unjustified by the event. When Edmund reached the castle of Leofric, he found the fortifications in the best

state of defence, and the stout thane himself busied in the discipline of a numerous force of his vassals, and unfearful of any attack that might be made by the skirmishing cavalry of the Northmen which, for the present, was the only force likely to come against them. The offer of the Earl he at first heard with disdain; for the hour of dinner was past, and a reasonable portion of his favourite beverage had made him strong and impatient. On the following morning, however, he replied to it with thanks, though he still declined to accept of it, unless the actual approach of the enemy in force should make an attack upon his castle a matter of greater probability and alarm than at the existing moment. He even manifested some little testiness of temper at the supposition that Edmund's personal assistance could be of consequence to him, and rather hastily urged his return to Maximus Castle. This exhortation agreed very well with the inclination of that youth, and he lost no time in obeying it.

The joy of Elfrida at this unexpected result, we need not depict. Days passed on, and weeks.

yet no enemy approached, no tidings were heard of the king, none of any army collecting to oppose the invaders. The few who possessed strongholds, and who had not already submitted, appeared to have fixed themselves in them, intent only upon self-defence, and without thought of any general combination of strength for the welfare of all. A kind of sullen despair seemed to oppress the land. All appeared gloomily awaiting an evil which they could not unite to overcome, but were yet resolved individually to resist.

It was within comparatively a small compass that the actual misery of the invasion was felt. The Northmen, who made war at the first for vengeance, for the glory of personal prowess, and for plunder, had become sensual as they were fierce, and bloody. Where they found the spoil, there they lingered and rioted; and till, like locusts, they had devoured all they could find, had no inclination to exchange their ease and debauchery for the labours and dangers of new conquest. Satisfied with the submission that they had met with during the first panic of

the country, they gradually drew together in Chippenham, and in their camps on the north of Wiltshire, and gave full indulgence to every species of sensuality. They had none of that calm ambition which contemplates the subjection of a kingdom at a blow, that the conqueror may impose upon a whole people a new dynasty, new tributes, new laws, and new customs; and that the voice of millions at once may acknowledge his power, and swear allegiance to his rule: for such an ambition their minds had not scope, nor had they discipline, or unity of strength and command, sufficient to have accomplished, could they have conceived it. The glory of individual valour, the enjoyment of the spoil, and the hope of an eternal banquet with the brave in the halls of Odin, these were the motives that governed them. Like troops of wild beasts, they were terrible in the attack; but, when the prey was laid low before them, they had no thought but of the present enjoyment. The country, during the few years of peace, and under the wise administration of Alfred, had acquired wealth and plenty. The Northmen gorged

themselves with it; and, like the huge serpent during the digestion of his meal, seemed to lie in a comparative torpor.

The first vivid apprehensions of those who lay beyond the immediate reach of the enemy became gradually less intense at this delay of the still impending, but less certain, evil. Many of those who had quitted their homes to seek the protection of the fortified places, ventured to go back to them. Edmund thought his presence no longer necessary at Maximus Castle, and believed that duty and respect to Leofric demanded his return to him. Elfrida approved of his motives; and he announced his intentions to the Earl. It was with astonishment, however, that, a few days before his departure, he beheld the arrival of father Cynewulf at the castle. For several hours, the monk was in close consultation with the Earl; but of the subject of their conference nothing publicly transpired. Even toward Edmund himself the monk preserved an almost total secresy. He was, however, more than usually respectful in his demeanour to him: spoke in terms of high admiration of his conduct;

and, though he developed nothing of the specific design that he had been agitating with Ethelbert, yet gave obscure hints of some great attempt for the salvation of the country; and intimated that Edmund himself might soon be called upon to take a prominent share in it.

On the following morning, father Cynewulf, escorted by a body of the Earl's horse, hastened to the small sea-port of Lyme; and, on the evening of the same day, took ship for France. From the few, and obscure, hints dropped by him just before his departure, it appeared to Edmund that a design was in hand to place upon the now vacant throne some man who might be able to extricate the country from its fetters, before the awakening enemy should arise to bind them more firmly. Judging of Alfred from the opinions taught him by the Earl, Edmund contemplated this project with satisfaction. He could have no blind veneration for the mere person of a king, and no notion of his abstract right to a sceptre. He saw in a monarch no representative of Deity, to be supplicated, feared, and obeyed, but a man elected by men to be the guardian of their

liberties, and the director of their strength. If unfitted for such duties, he considered such a man to be, as a matter of course, unfit for the throne; and regarded his removal from it as nothing more than the substitution of a better instrument for one that had been found defective. More reflection, or more experience, would have taught him much to qualify such opinions; but, at the present, he saw nothing in the attempt to fill the abandoned throne, but a measure at once just, and important. The air and language of the Earl after the departure of Cynewulf confirmed Edmund in his conjecture of the design about to be attempted: and the subject gave frequent and anxious employment to his thoughts.

CHAPTER V.

Many hours had not elapsed after Edmund's arrival at Cothelstone, before he found that the hostility of Oswulf, who had now perfectly recovered from his accident, had lost nothing of its malice. For a time, he returned this with even more than his usual forbearance; his thoughts were elevated by the important considerations of his country's peril, and his feelings were softened by love, and saddened by absence from the beloved object. Oswulf's enmity excited in him nothing but pity and contempt; and yet he could not forget that the reptile whom he despised had shewn himself to possess a sting which had nearly proved deadly. That Oswulf might again attempt his life, appeared to Edmund a chance too probable to be wholly slighted: but he had hitherto concealed from all the intended crime, in the hope that the criminal might repent and

amend, and he would not now seek security for the future by revealing the guilt of the past. The behaviour of Oswulf, however, more and more excited his suspicions, and kept up in him a perpetual watchfulness and anxiety which at length made life almost burthensome to him. To go evermore in armour was a slight grievance to him, and was at once justified, and divested of particularity, by the dangerous state of the country: but, perpetually to be on his guard against a sudden and secret stroke,—to secure his chamber against the nightly assassin,—to dread the cup, or the food, of which others had not partaken before him,—this was a course of harassing suspicion which he could not long endure. With pain too he perceived that the hearts of Leofric and Kentwina were less warm towards him than they had been; and he knew well that from Oswulf's hand the poison had been dropped into them. But the antidote which he had it in his power to administer he still withheld, because he could only restore their love toward himself by exciting detestation toward their son, and awakening the most poig-

nant agony in themselves. Every day he expected that his apprehensions from the one domestic enemy might be removed by a call to confront the banded enemies of his country. But nothing of importance occurred: Cynewulf did not return, no summons came from the Earl; no news of the awakening Northmen, no intelligence of the king. Six weeks had elapsed from the day of the invasion, and two from the time that he had quitted Maximus Castle. Rumours of occasional and partial plunderings by the cavalry of the enemy, in places to which they had not before extended, and which were understood to threaten a change of position in their main bodies, had begun to be circulated, and there were also whispers of a Saxon army secretly gathering somewhere about the north-west of Somerset. No leader, however, was named, and they who had one day placed this army in Somerset, transferred it on the next to Wilts, to Dorset, or to Berks. All was uncertain, and obscure, and alarming. The day which Edmund had expected to summon him against the enemy appeared to him to be still as distant as

ever; but that of his departure from the house of Leofric was at hand.

He was returning alone in the gloom of the evening from the priory, when an unknown voice, apparently close to him, in low, but clear words, called his name. The place in which Edmund walked was a narrow lane, bounded by high and thick hedges of holly, which effectually skreened the speaker from sight, and prevented Edmund from advancing upon him. To the soft, but solemn voice, he promptly answered, "Who speaks? and wherefore at this hour and place?"

"Sir Edmund," answered the voice, "snakes are in the path: turn back, and seek another road."

Edmund paused a moment, and then answered, "Give me first to know who you are that speak, and who are they from whom I must turn."

"From those whose sting will be sure and fatal: ask me no more. Go on, if you will,—death lies in your path, were you three men instead of one."

"Tell me," replied Edmund, "who are these enemies, and wherefore they seek my life. I will not go back for the threat of one who hides his face from me, and perhaps mocks me with idle tales. I know of but one man that would lift hand against me; and him I fear not. I am armed; and no foe shall find me an easy conquest. Answer then who you are, and who are they that threaten me."

"I will answer you no more,"—instantly rejoined the voice, in a deep and surly tone, quite different from the former assumed one,—"Return, or pass on, I wash my hands of your blood."

Footsteps, rapidly retreating, were immediately heard. Edmund sprang forward; and, stooping his head, forced a way through the thorny wall; but, when he stood on the other side, nothing was visible, and no sound could be heard. He was almost sure that the last tones of the speaker's voice were not strange to him; and soon referred them to a fellow whom he had sometimes seen in the company of Oswulf. That such a person should have intended to warn

him against any real danger, he could not believe; and felt therefore assured that the whole was some vulgar scheme to throw ridicule upon him. After returning to the road, he paused a moment for reflection; but, feeling more and more confident of the justness of his first conjecture, he pursued his way without fear; and speedily forgot even the slight anger that had stirred in him against the boorish intruder.

He had not proceeded far, though his thoughts were already with the noble Elfrida in the castle of her illustrious ancestor, when, almost in the same point of time, the twang of bowstrings, the hiss of arrows, and the stroke of three or four of them upon various parts of his armour, startled him from his reverie. He had scarcely time to draw his weapon, when five men, armed with swords, leaped from a dark recess in the thick hedge almost immediately before him. Edmund felt a momentary giddiness, from the suddenness of the surprize, and the heavy jar of two of the shafts upon his helmet, one of which had narrowly missed piercing him in the right temple. But his presence of mind instantly returned.

He might have turned back, and, by his unequalled swiftness, have set pursuit at defiance; but he saw that the men before him were not defended by armour; and had therefore sufficient confidence in his own strength and dexterity to think himself not very much overmatched by their number. With the extraordinary energy which he could at times put forth, and which appeared, in contrast to his usual serenity, like the sudden uprising of the angry lion disturbed in his hour of placid gravity, he sprang upon his opponents; and at two strokes, which appeared to them rapid as the glances of light, struck down the two who were nearest. His intention was to force his way through, and to shed no blood unnecessarily: at the same instant, therefore, that he struck, he rushed forward,—overthrew one man behind, who had not time to aim a blow at him, and found himself in a moment beyond the reach of his enemies' swords. Not a word had hitherto passed; but Edmund now,—seeing, as he stopped to bring round his shield, which had hitherto been slung at his back, that no pursuit was attempted,—

called out to them in a stern voice, " What means this, fellows? For whom do you take me?—and who are you that lie in wait in the darkness to take the life of one man?"

There was no answer. The ruffians seemed wholly occupied with their wounded comrades: and nothing was heard but a deep groan, which, though issuing from one who had just sought to slay him, Edmund could not hear without emotion.

" Answer me,"—he said again, but in a more subdued tone, " wherefore have you done this, —and in what have I injured you? Tell me also if your fellows are dangerously hurt; for, if so, I may render assistance to them, if you will pledge yourselves to stand aloof, and do me no farther wrong."

Again there was no reply: but Edmund could hear the low voice of one who appeared to struggle with pain at once and with disappointed malice, urging the reluctant men to further aggression.

" The curse of God upon you!" said the wounded man, in tones which he intended to

reach no other ears than those around him, "The fires of hell seize your dastardly souls! Why have you let him pass? Drive your arrows through his carcase, or by the light of heaven! and the blackness of the pit! if I live, I will put every man of you to death with my own hand! Bend your bows, if you be men, and get his heart's blood out of him!"

"I hear you, Sir Oswulf," said Edmund with an angry and commanding tone, advancing as he spoke: "and I say to your misguided followers, that, if one bow-string is drawn against me, they shall rue it in their own blood."

"Hell-dog!" cried Oswulf, almost choking with impotent fury, "you have murdered me! But, if I can come from the grave to haunt you, you shall see me and feel me every moment of your hated life, till the fiends come to fetch you to your place! Begone! and poison not the air with your venomed presence. You have blasted all my life,—let me die at least without the sound of your hateful voice in my ear!"

A heavy groan terminated this speech, of which the last words were scarcely audible.

"Stand back, fellows!" cried Edmund, coming among the men, who, stupified with fear, offered no resistance: "stand back,—and let me see if I can give any help to your master. But fly, some of you, instantly to the priory, and summon the Leech Wiglaf. Say that a man, dangerously wounded, craves his assistance."

Two of the men, without speaking, immediately made off; and Edmund, laying on the ground his shield and sword, stooped to examine the wound of Oswulf, who now lay still and silent.

"Haste for lights to the cottage of Ring!" cried Edmund to the man who remained, "haste for your life; and bring cloth to bind the wound!"

Without speaking a word, the fellow ran off; and Edmund remained alone with the two wounded and motionless men. Neither seemed to breathe: there was a profound silence unbroken but by a low gurgling which Edmund supposed to proceed from some small spring in the fields close to him, but which, to his horror, he found to be the gushing of blood from the body that lay beside Oswulf. His situation was most ap-

palling. Concealment of the present attempt of Oswulf upon him was impossible; and, if attempted, might, by delaying prompt assistance, cause a fatal catastrophe, if, indeed, that had not already befallen. While, therefore, he tore from the coarse garment with which Oswulf had disguised himself, such portions as he thought would make proper bandages, he continued with repeated shouts to invoke assistance. To his great vexation, he found that under this garment was a coat of mail, through which the sword had cut, and which prevented him from gaining immediate access to the wound. Forcing open as quickly as possible this impediment, he felt a sickening gush of hot blood; and, on applying his hand, found a deep and wide wound on the right shoulder and back, which appeared to have almost severed the arm. Still shouting for assistance, he proceeded with fold upon fold to tighten the bandage, till he thought that the blood at length ceased to well through. Oswulf now, with heavy groans, gave sign of returning life. Edmund placed him on his back: and hastened to give help to his companion. Him, however, he found

to be quite dead, and already stiffening. The nature of the wound, which he, nevertheless, examined, hoping at first, against conviction, that life might not be utterly fled,—immediately assured him that no aid, however promptly administered, could have availed. Heart-sick at such a scene, he turned then again to Oswulf, whose regular, and now stronger, breathing, gave token that life had vigorously rallied in him. The bandages appeared effectually applied; and Edmund had now nothing to do but await the return of those whom he had dispatched for help. No one, however, came. Again and again he lifted up his powerful voice: but his only answer was the echo of wood and hill. The cottage of Ring was at so inconsiderable a distance that the fellow whom he had sent thither might easily, he thought, have returned in less than half the time that had already passed. Darkness had now sunk heavily upon the earth, and in the sky not a star was visible. The situation in which he was placed became insupportably dreadful, now that he had no longer a call upon him for active exertion. He stood in silence with the dead,

slain by his own sword, and with his mortal enemy, wounded perhaps to the death. His hands were clammy with the horrid fluid, from which he could not cleanse them; and the ground on which he stood was like the floor of a slaughter-house. There was no sound but of his own palpitating heart, and the heavy breathing, intermingled with groans, and words imperfectly formed, as by one in frightful slumber, which proceeded from Oswulf. Again and again he shouted for help: but no help came. A conjecture at length shot across his mind that, with the hope of securing themselves from implication in the deed, the companions of Oswulf had abandoned him. This suspicion, after a time, became certainty; and he had no alternative but to quit the wounded man, and himself fly for assistance. For a moment he reflected upon the course that he ought to pursue. The spot where he stood was at about equal distances from the priory, and from the house of Leofric. His wish was to render to Oswulf the quickest aid, and to spare to the family at Cothelstone all pain that might be avoidable. By conveying Oswulf to the priory, both these objects

would be best attained: surgical help would be at hand; and possibly, till the greatest danger was passed, the fate of Oswulf might be wholly concealed from his relatives. That any information would be given of it by those who had fled, appeared most improbable, since their own safety would by that means be compromised; and that the absolute silence of the monks might be hoped for, until, at the least, some decided change had taken place, he could not doubt. The frequent, and long, absences of Oswulf would permit his present one to pass unnoticed; and the crisis, whatsoever that might prove, might thus be got over without inflicting upon the beloved inmates of the castle any pain which might be spared them. To remove Oswulf with safety and secresy to the priory was thus his indubitable course; and he proceeded immediately to effect it. To his great strength, it would have been a task of slight difficulty to bear away, unassisted, the bulky body: but the fear lest, from any position in which he could carry it, a new flowing of blood might be caused, deterred him from attempting this; and it was therefore necessary that he

should first remove it from the middle of the path,—where it might have been trampled upon by any animal that chanced to pass,—and afterwards repair with all speed to procure other help. Having then, with great care, lifted the groaning man, and placed him in the very recess of the thick hedge from which he had so lately rushed to dye his hands in blood, Edmund, with all the haste that the darkness permitted, set forth toward the priory.

With loud strokes he soon thundered at the gate: but the faint sound of voices within told him that the monks were then engaged in the service of the evening, and that his summons might not soon reach their ears. Again and again, however, he applied the massive knocker, with a force that resembled the strokes of a sledge hammer; but the choral sounds within still swelled; and he had slight hope that, until the hymn had ceased, his alarum could reach the ears of the monks. As, for a moment, he turned his head in the direction of the fatal spot, he beheld lights flickering to and fro; and hoped, yet feared, that they proceeded from some who, alarmed by his shouts,

had at length hasted to inquire into the cause. He hoped, because help might be at hand,—he feared, because, if injudiciously rendered, it might prove dangerous, or perhaps fatal, to its object.

But the hymn seemed drawing to a close; and he was most anxious to procure the attendance of the Leech Wiglaf. Again, and now without intermission, he thundered at the gate; and was at length answered by the voice of the porter within, who demanded his name and business.

"'Tis I, Bertulph," he replied;—"open the gate instantly: a man is wounded, and bleeding to death."

The door was hastily opened.

"Call Leech Wiglaf quickly," said Edmund, "and eight of the brethren to bring the bodies to the priory."

The light, which the porter lifted from the floor after he had closed the heavy gate, fell upon Edmund; and, at the sight of his blood-stained face, his gory hands and armour, the porter uttered a cry of horror, and let fall the lamp, which was instantly extinguished.

" Fool !" exclaimed Edmund, in the moment of vexation, " make haste, or he may die." Then in a milder tone,—" Good Bertulph, bestir thee ; and forgive me."

" Oh God !" cried the affrighted porter, confused, and unable to find his way through the place known to him during forty years, " Oh God ! here has been murder done ! help ! help !"

" Peace !" said Edmund to him, in a deprecating voice,—" peace ! good Bertulph !—There has been bloodshed, but no murder : and this delay may cause a fatal end. Haste, and do my bidding in quiet : I would not myself, in this guise, appear before the unprepared brethren !"

At this moment, steps were heard at the gate ; and the heavy knocker was again furiously applied. The aged porter, with a new outcry, began hastily to retire ; but, stumbling in the dark, fell heavily upon the pavement.

" Who knocks ?" demanded Edmund, almost deafened by the din, and wholly unconscious of the fall of Bertulph, who now lay still.

" Open the gate !" vociferated several speak-

ers at once, " open the gate ! Murder has been done near this place."

Edmund recognized the voices of one or two of the servants of Leofric ; and immediately threw open the door. At that moment a group of alarmed monks, bearing lights, rushed into the hall, and met those who were pouring in from the gate.

CHAPTER VI.

The clamour of voices was for a moment deafening: but the bloody figure of Edmund glared at once upon all eyes, and every man shrank with a sudden cry of horror from him.

"Peace!" said Edmund with a calm energy: "where is the leech? call him instantly."

Turning then to the servants of the thane. "Have you brought the body?" he pursued, "where is he?"—

"He has confessed! he has confessed!"—replied every voice: "Seize him, and carry him away!"

The men were armed; and Edmund had with him no weapon but his dagger, which he made no attempt to draw. Trusting to their number, the men rushed forward to secure him; but he with such ease shook from him those who had laid hands upon him, and so overawed all by the

sudden vehemence of his voice and manner, that they stood for a while without venturing to approach him. He seized the moment of silence, and spoke to them.

"Brethren," he said, "and you, the followers of the worthy thane, my kind and beloved father,—you are deceived by appearances, and confused by surprise. I am no murderer,—but have myself escaped murder from the hands of four persons, aided, and suborned to the deed, I regret to say it, by Sir Oswulf, who has himself, with one of his crew, met a punishment which I were glad that they had escaped."

The calm and simple air with which Edmund spoke this disposed the greater number to give full credit to his assertion; but there were some who could not be so easily satisfied.

"This tale will not do for us, Sir Edmund,"—cried one of these, a huge, coarse-featured, savage-looking fellow, whom Edmund immediately recollected as one of the constant companions of Oswulf in his favourite pastime of bull-baiting, and whom he knew to be by trade a butcher, and by repute a brawler and bully. Rol-

ling his drunken eyes, and brandishing the knife which he had drawn from his girdle, in place of other weapon, " This tale will not do for us"—he cried. " Dont think to foist upon us your stories about fighting five men, as if you thought yourself old King Arthur, or some better chap may be. Sir Oswulf is wounded to death; and your sword and shield lie in the road, covered with his blood. But you should have struck t'other blow if you wanted to 'scape the cord and the tree; for he is not dead yet, and he says that you waylaid him, and struck him down before he had time to defend himself. But, howsoever, Sir Leofric is there himself; and you must come along with us to answer to him; and that you *shall* do whether you will or no; unless mayhap you mean to play King Arthur over again with us,—and that's what I reckon you'll not find so easy to do as to brag of."

" Sigtreg's in the right of it, my masters"—shouted several voices,—" and we'll stand by him, come what will."

Edmund with a calm contempt looked upon the ruffianly butcher as he continued his insolent

address; and seemed hesitating whether he should at all reply to him. The fellow had begun to quail under his stern glance; but, encouraged by the voices of those about him, proceeded with new audacity.

"And we should be glad to know of you furthermore, valiant King Arthur, what your worship did with the five men that you sliced up, as you say,—for you cannot have killed and eaten them too, I fancy; and dead men don't commonly carry off their own bodies."

During this speech the prior entered, and imposed silence upon Sigtreg, that he might himself question Edmund. The latter was about to reply, when the leech appeared; and to him Edmund turned his first attention.

"Haste, my good friend," he said, "stay for no questions. Oswulf is dangerously wounded, and may die if your help is delayed. Follow some of these men, while I remain here for a while that I may not by my presence disturb the feelings of Sir Leofric. Tell him, however, to believe nothing that he may hear, and to rest assured of my truth and innocence, which I

shall ere long make clear as sunlight. Away, away !"

The purpose for which he was summoned had been made known to Wiglaf; and such things as the case might demand had been hastily provided by him; and were now in the hands of brother Elf, who came close behind. Uttering the single ejaculation of " Christ save us !" as they looked upon Edmund, the good leech and his attendant went forth, and were followed by three or four of the men, whose voices, as they passed on, were heard altogether pouring out the strange tidings. Six or seven men, however, with the grim butcher at their head, still remained; and, after a moment's silence, the latter, addressing the prior, urged the command of Leofric that Sir Edmund should be brought before him.

To this fellow Edmund would make no reply; but, addressing the others, who were the servants of the thane, and of course well known to him, he said with a calm tone and manner, " return, my friends, to my good father Leofric; say that in a short time I will cheerfully come to him, and make full explanation of all that has

befallen. It would not be seemly, or right that, in this horrid guise, I should appear before him: nor would the moment of his first distress be suited for a tale that must bring dishonour upon his son, and that cannot be patiently listened to from one whom he may believe to be an intended murderer. Say, however, that, if such be his pleasure, I fervently entreat of him that he will not permit the night to pass without giving me an opportunity to clear myself from all suspicion. I will but wash away these horrid stains my friends, and then await here your return."

Bowing to the prior after he had signed to them to go, he then said, "with your leave, reverend father, I will now retire within; and there speak farther with you."

He moved onward as he said this; and had advanced two or three steps, when the ferocious Sigtreg, after a glance at the men near him, and an exclamation, "Let not the bloody murderer escape," rushed forward, seized upon the steel collar of Edmund with his left hand, and with his right brandished the knife in his face.

The motion was instantaneous,—and the men, forgetting in the suddenness of the act, the presence in which they stood, sprang after Sigtreg to assist his purpose. But, ere they had well begun the shout with which they accompanied the rush, the bulky butcher was forced from his grasp upon the collar of Edmund, and hurled with violence to the ground. Two others, who were behind, and who broke the fall which might else have had worse consequence, were overthrown with him: and, when they arose, their ardour for the arrest was wonderfully abated. The prior now addressed them.

"Go hence, instantly," he said with an imperative voice, "and learn more reverence for this place, and for those whose right it is to command here. Not to you is any man who stands within these walls accountable: but neither shall any criminal, of what rank soever, find here abettors of his guilt. If Sir Edmund have committed the deed with which you charge him, be sure that here the arm of the law shall find him: meantime depart as you are bidden, and bring back to us the pleasure of the noble thane

touching that which has been entrusted to you. Sir Edmund retire within."

The prior with great dignity motioned the latter to go forward; and then waved his hand to the men in token that they must immediately quit the place. Edmund had speedily recovered his composure: and now, after a brief and quiet assurance to the departing servants that he should be found ready to obey the command of their master, bowed to the prior, and withdrew.

No reply was attempted by any one; and the lowering butcher himself limped out of the gate without a word. The porter, however, as he prepared to draw the bolt behind them, heard a voice, in a jeering way, say something about "King Arthur;" to which Sigtreg, with a surly tone, appeared to make a reply, of which, however, but a few words were audible.

The account which Edmund gave to the prior, and afterwards to the assembled brethren, instantly convinced them of his perfect innocence: but the reply which soon arrived from Leofric was unfavourable, and indeed harsh. The prior himself, on hearing the refusal of the thane to

see Edmund, set off, though the hour was now late, to the castle; but he returned without having changed Leofric's sentiments. This was most painful to Edmund; but he hoped that a new day would find the worthy thane in a more placable and impartial mood. A second visit on the following morning was, however, equally unsuccessful: and the kind prior was even under the necessity of requesting from Edmund explanations of some parts of his story, which appeared irreconcileable with facts.

Edmund had related an attack made upon him by five persons, one of whom he had slain, and left in the road near to Oswulf. It appeared, however, that when Leofric and his servants, alarmed by a voice calling for help, had hastened to the spot, no such person had been found. A boor of the neighbourhood, indeed, was with Oswulf, and appeared to be binding his wounds; but this man protested that he had but a little time before come to the place, and had seen no person except Sir Oswulf, who had only just strength sufficient to inform him that he had been set upon by Edmund in the dark of the evening,

and that he was bleeding to death. These things were deposed upon oath by both Oswulf and the boor. Edmund's shield and sword, covered with blood, were found on the road; and he himself, reeking with gore, in the hall of the priory, whither it was supposed that he had fled for sanctuary. These opposite testimonies, together with the incredible nature of the story that Edmund could have escaped from the sudden attack of five armed men,—not one of whom, by the way, might any where be heard of since,—were, in the opinion of Leofric, circumstances too strong to be defeated by the single assertion of Edmund; and the thane was, therefore, firmly resolved to dismiss him for ever from his house and his protection.

Edmund's explanations, and solemn assurances, —certain facts to which he referred,—and the permission which, under the promise of secrecy, he gave to brother Elf, to reveal the former attempt of Oswulf upon his life,—effectually established in the mind of the prior a conviction of his innocence. Another interview on the succeeding morning, in which Father Edelhun de-

tailed to Leofric all the new explanations of Edmund, suppressing only the attempt of Oswulf to poison him, was still without the success anticipated. The earnest pleadings, however, of the good prior, his confident, and firmly asserted, belief of the innocence of Edmund, the high character which that youth had till then ever preserved, and certain considerations, to which the thane and Kentwina had not hitherto allowed their full weight, but which now began gradually to work upon their minds, threw at length over the whole affair an air of so much mystery, as to soften a little the asperity of their feelings towards Edmund. The sentence of absolute abandonment which Leofric had pronounced against him, was, in consequence thereof, commuted to an order never again to appear at the castle, until his innocence should be proved: and this command was, moreover, softened by a present in money which would secure Edmund from want, and a gift of horse and armour to bear him to the war.

Edmund had of himself resolved not to return to the castle, where, on the recovery of Oswulf,

new scenes of blood might be expected; and had already requested the prior to convey to Leofric his wish to join the Earl of Somerset, or any other noble who might be disposed to raise the standard against the invaders. So far then his desire had been fulfilled; and he resigned to Providence the future means for restoring him to the favour of his beloved father and guardian.

In the mind of the gentle Ethelburga, nothing had been able to excite a moment's doubt of the perfect innocence of Edmund; and scarcely an hour elapsed in which, by such means as she dared to use, she did not endeavour to establish the same conviction in the hearts of her parents, and of all the household. These attempts were, however, for the present wholly useless; and excited, in most, nothing but stronger suspicions that, to the love which she entertained for this outcast youth, was owing the procrastination of that union with Sigifred from which all the members of the household had so long expected such splendid advantages. Ethelburga knew well the depravity of her brother's heart, and the rare virtue and nobleness of Edmund; and would rather

believe the latter, though with all the world opposed to him, than the former with all the world on his side. With a heart bleeding for his misfortunes, she had therefore sought and found with Edmund daily interviews; and now came to bid, and to take, a farewell which she feared might be long, but which she wished him to believe could not but be brief. They passed together an hour of bitter sorrow; and then parted. Ethelburga, with tearful eyes, returned home; and Edmund, after an affectionate adieu to the prior, and every member of the fraternity, mounted his horse, and, with a heavy heart, took his way toward the castle of Maximus.

He had no fear of what, in his new and painful situation, might be the opinion of Elfrida respecting him: but he could not quite subdue a feeling of humbled pride, which he yet knew that he ought to conquer. However strong in his own integrity, there was a mortifying, and ever-working, consciousness that he might be an object of suspicion in every eye; and an assurance that his darkened prospects in life must cast upon himself the shadow of their own gloom.

He was still that which he had ever been, and such as had commanded the respect of all, and the love and admiration of many; but he must now be seen in a new light, and he knew well that the flower whose beauty attracts all eyes while the sun shines upon it, is ever unheeded in the obscurity of evening. Even to himself, he did not appear that which he had been. Self respect cannot remain undiminished when the esteem of others is taken from us. There was in him a painful consciousness, never before felt, of dependance and inferiority. He had consented to accept, as the bounty of a superior, that which hitherto had been only as the fond gift of a father. The horse, and the superb armour had been considered his own before the displeasure of Leofric had been excited against him; and, in retaining these, he felt, therefore, little pain: but the gold had been dispensed to him afterwards, and almost as a charity to protect him from need, and this bitterly galled his pride. He had at first strenuously refused to accept it; but neither the prior, nor Ethelburga, would bear to Leofric his refusal: and their arguments

and exhortations had finally appeared to subdue his resolve. He had ceased to remonstrate with them, because they had taught him that he could not, without an insult to the kind thane, return his gift; and that he could not, without inflicting upon him undeserved pain, allow him to suppose that the long cherished object of his love was destitute. He had, therefore, subdued his own pride, that his protector might not feel pain, but he could not subdue his own suffering. The thought that Leofric might look upon him as a sordid acceptor of his alms unceasingly tormented him: but he had resolved to endure, and be silent. The gold, however, he could not touch, though he submitted to be thought its possessor. He had still, of his former store, so much as might, he thought, suffice for his wants; and the last gift, the humiliating charity, as he, perhaps overproudly, called it, was safely deposited in the hands of the good brother Elf, till it might be restored to the giver, or at least accepted under very different conditions, such as he still hoped that time would offer.

CHAPTER VII.

It was then on a gloomy morning, early in the month of March, that the banished youth, dressed in splendid armour, and mounted upon his beautiful grey steed, a gold-handled sword at his side, a glittering shield of brass slung at his back, and a steel-pointed spear in his right hand, rode slowly from the gate of the priory. His ample cloak of the finest crimson cloth, faced with rich furs, and secured by a golden buckle at his throat, wrapped him round, and served at once as a skreen for his armour against the drizzling rain, and as a covering for himself against the northern wind, which blew with a keenness that seemed to threaten a speedy snow-storm. Bitterly did he sigh as, ever and anon, he turned toward the house that, for so many happy years, had been his home, looks of sad regret, and eyes glistening with tears. In mental

vision he beheld the long loved inmates, now estranged from him, but to *his* heart dear as when most he was their idol. Every apartment, —every familiar thing which they contained, appeared to rise before his eye : a thousand cheerful scenes glanced through his memory ; kind looks, endearing words, sports, studies, hours of rising, and of rest,—a life of happy years, compressed almost into a moment. All were now lost to him,—might they ever be restored ? The gentle Ethelburga, too, her pale face dewed with tears, as when she parted from him, was present to his eye ; and her soft pleading voice seemed breathing in his ear. Every oft-seen face of kind domestic,—every affectionate animal that he had caressed,—every thing but his deadly enemy, found a place in his recollections, and every thing seemed at once to have acquired a claim upon his friendship. The wind moaned a solemn music that appeared to him like a dirge over his perished happiness. His heart swelled within him,—he felt as if he could not tear himself from the spot. With drooping head, as though he sympathized with the feelings of his

master, the noble grey steed trod slowly on. At the last point where he could fully behold the house, Edmund paused, and took a long and lingering gaze. All looked sombre and still. The sentinels upon the southern and eastern walls paced slowly to and fro: clouds and mist hung over the castle; the hill-tops behind were wrapped in vapour: there was no sound heard. With a heavy sigh he at length turned his horse; —but a window opened,—it was in the chamber of Ethelburga,—a female figure looked forth; it was she herself;—she kissed her hand,—she waved thrice farewell;—he answered sign for sign: his heart seemed bursting. She disappeared;—the window was again closed,—he sobbed bitterly,—turned away,—and once more set forth upon his sorrowful journey. But the snow-storm that had long threatened soon began to descend; and he aroused himself for the performance of his journey. He found the gates of Taunton rigorously guarded, and the inhabitants, wrapped in their long, wide cloaks, crowding the chief streets to hear and spread the newly arrived tidings of armies levying, and foes com-

ing on. He enquired; and rode rapidly forward. The snow fell slowly in broad and dense flakes; and his path was not always easy to find. Safely, however, his noble steed bore him on; and, while it was yet early in the afternoon, he passed through the broad gates of Maximus Castle.

The rumours that had stirred the inhabitants of Taunton, had not reached the inmates of the castle. The Earl, and Sigifred, gave to them an anxious hearing; but suspended their belief. The intelligence, however, which more nearly related to himself, Edmund found it a less easy task to unfold; and, after he had made a modest explanation of his altered circumstances, he scarcely knew in what spirit it had been received, or in what way it might influence their future conduct toward him. There was upon the face of Sigifred an expression which did not look like sympathy for his grief, and the meaning of which he could not conjecture. From the Earl he met with a prompt invitation to remain under his protection, and to share with him the toils of the war, which he felt sure could not be distant: but,

in both Ethelbert and his son, he thought he could perceive an almost immediate decrease of the respect formerly shown to him: and he resolved to quit them the instant his suspicions should be verified. From Cyneburga he met with real sympathy, and cheering exhortations: but with Elfrida he felt that he must unburthen his heart alone. To her, therefore, he that day said nothing of his altered fortunes;—but requested that, on the following morning, he might meet her in the Greek hall, where, attended by one trusted maiden, they had often before held happy communion. Elfrida had already heard from Sigifred the bare fact that Edmund had been abandoned by Leofric; and, with a tearful eye, and a warm pressure of the hand, she promised compliance with his wish. That look, and that pressure, would have assured Edmund, could he have ever doubted it, that Elfrida was unalterable in her attachment: and he laid his head upon the pillow with a conviction that friendship does not always fade with changing fortune, and with a hope that happiness had not utterly deserted him.

When, after a sleepless night, he looked forth

on the following morning, he thought he could read in the altered skies a prediction of his own brightening prospects. The snow was all melted away, the birds were singing joyously, the sunbeams glittered upon the gem-dropped trees and grass, and a warm south-west wind breathed redolent of spring. He hailed the glorious day, and strove to speak to his heart words of comfort and of hope. But a more bitter storm than that of the elements of yesterday was awaiting him.

The Greek hall, it may be remembered, was one of that magnificent suit which had been long disused. This, however, as opening immediately into the principal garden, was frequently used as a kind of promenade, when the weather would not permit exercise upon the stately garden walks; and was provided with a few books, and some plain furniture; and, in the winter season, was cheered with ample fires of wood. Being open alike to every member or visitor of the family, it was a place where, without any appearance of seeking privacy, the lovers might enjoy each other's society; and yet one where

they need have little apprehension of being disturbed. Here, during the time of his recovery, Sigifred had frequently spent hours in the company of Elfrida and Edmund, and here the two latter, attended by Cyneburga, had often terminated the morning's exercise, and listened to the rain or the thunder which had driven them from the garden. To Elfrida this stately hall, with its noble statues, looking like an eternal life of silence and rest, was more pleasing than any other part of the immense fabric; and, while she walked in solemn mood, and with her light slow footfall awaked the murmuring echoes, it seemed to her rapt fancy as if the mighty spirits of long past ages were stirring round her, and discoursing with voices that were no longer of earth. Seldom passed a day in which this beloved spot was unvisited by her; and here, during many a happy hour, attended by her mother, or one confidential maiden, she had listened to the melodious voice of Edmund, while he opened to her delighted mind the stores of beauty and knowledge, hitherto hidden from her, in the few Roman poets, historians, and philosophers,

whose works, deposited here by Maximus himself, had escaped neglect, and the wasting hand of long years. Her mind, according to the usage of the time, had been little cultivated; but the soil was free from weeds, rich, and deep; and the delicate flowers of poetry, or the stately trees of philosophy, equally flourished, and took root.

In this beloved spot, then, accompanied by her handmaiden Beda, the noble daughter of Ethelbert, walking with slow and pensive step, and in profound silence, awaited, at the appointed time, the coming of Edmund. At every previous meeting, he had been first at the place; but she had now waited a considerable time before he appeared. He had been delayed by a conversation with Sigifred, from which he had not, without evident uneasiness, disengaged himself. His footsteps, rapidly advancing, were at length heard; and Beda respectfully retired to the farther part of the hall.

"Pardon me, Lady Elfrida," he said, as he entered, and bowed to her with that look and manner which denotes an obeisance of the heart, rather than a mere ceremonious movement of

the body, "I take shame for having permitted you to await my coming; but I have not been master of myself; and fear that I may have given offence to your brother, in my anxiety to avoid an appearance of disrespect to yourself."

The hand which he extended to her was cordially met by hers; and forgiveness was instantly pronounced. A few moments then passed; and they stood in silence, looking one upon the other. The countenance of Elfrida was pale and anxious, that of Edmund was also pale: and the words which he had to speak appeared to falter upon his lips. Gathering at length his resolution, "You see before you," he said, "a ruined, and almost hopeless man."

"Say not so," she replied, laying her hand with a fond pressure upon his arm,—"unfortunate you may now be,—but not ruined,—and never can be hopeless, while there exists a God who cares for the good, the gentle, and the brave. Your present mishap is known to me, dearest Edmund, and, though I am ignorant of its cause, yet I know not more surely that I live, than that you must be innocent, and wronged. Tell me

briefly then all that has chanced;—tell me the worst that you endure, and that you apprehend. Leofric and Kentwina, and Ethelburga, love me: I will myself plead your cause with them; and I will not believe that I can fail."

There was an impassioned earnestness in the tones and look of Elfrida, which glowed like a warm fire upon the chilled feelings of Edmund. One word too, which she had never before spoken to him, came upon his heart like the rich breath of summer to one who just steps forth from the damps of a dungeon. She had called him, in the moment of his desolation, *dearest* Edmund; she had dwelt with a fervency upon that little sound, which made it seem to him like the opening of a brighter heaven: she had looked upon him with a devotion that made him feel how pleasant a thing it would be at that moment to offer up life for her. His feelings for a while prevented speech; but he collected himself at length, and related to her all that had befallen, and pictured all the trials that threatened him.

"But your kindness, my beloved Elfrida," he concluded, "is to me a rich, a bounteous com-

pensation for all that I have lost, a happiness far outweighing all the misery that I may have to endure. While I preserve your love, I hold a gem to which all the wealth of the world beside is poor: while your eye shines on me thus, my soul can never be in darkness."

"I will speak with my father," said Elfrida, "he will permit me to visit Leofric;—I will depart to-morrow,—I will open the eyes of the honest thane, and of Kentwina,—I will join with the noble-hearted Ethelburga,—we will plead for you, day and night,—we will weary out opposition,—we will force them to see the truth; you shall be recalled with honour, dearest Edmund,—you shall triumph over your hateful enemy,—you shall again be the pride and the glory of your friends. Do not despair,—the way is clear,—the victory is certain: heaven cannot long abandon the good, and permit the wicked to oppress them: I feel strong in your cause, and will never cease till the battle is won."

"Noble, pure, and generous creature!" replied Edmund, fervently embracing her, "what have I done to merit such a love! But you are

young, beloved Elfrida," added he, relaxing from his embrace, " you are wealthy, beautiful, and of high descent: the nobles of the country will sue for your hand,—your father will give you in marriage to one of the rich and powerful,—and whither then shall I fly to hide my wretchedness ?"

" I *am* young, Sir Edmund," she answered, with a proud and elevated look,—" I *shall be* wealthy,—and perchance I may be sued by the rich and powerful: but among these I have not yet seen one to whom I would surrender my liberty,—I never shall see one. By no law *may* my father, and by no authority or influence ever *shall* he compel me to give my hand in marriage. When the ring clasps the finger of Elfrida, it must be put on by him alone who has first won her heart. The grave rather shall be my bridal bed than that of one to whom I cannot render up my soul as wholly and irrevocably as my mortal body."

Her eyes, while she spake, kindled with a light such as had never before streamed from human orbs upon those of her astonished and

delighted listener. He could not speak; but he gazed upon her as upon some superior nature whom he only dared to worship.

"He who seeks my hand," she added with a softer tone and look, "must win it, not with wealth, or with power, or with rank, but with a devoted love, and a pure and noble soul."

Still Edmund could form no reply: he looked upon her face,—he bent his knee,—he impressed fervent kisses upon her hand. He rose,—he clasped her in his arms,—he strained her to his bosom. There was a dead stillness in the hall. It was a moment of happiness,—but purchased by long days of misery. The stamp of a mailed foot, the voice of rage disturbed the lovers.

"Fiends and darkness!" cried Sigifred, "what do I see! villain! damnable villain! thy life shall pay for this!"

He drew his sword as he spoke these words, and, with a face distorted by fury, advanced toward Edmund. Elfrida, with a slight shriek, drew back,—but instantly advanced, and stood between Edmund and her incensed brother.

"Sigifred forbear!" she cried,—"I will explain all."

"Out of my way!" exclaimed the enraged youth, "out of my sight, debased wretch!"

"Ha!" cried Edmund, unable to endure that word, though he had felt no anger at the "villain" addressed to himself,—"this to your sister? this to——"

"Ay villain!" retorted Sigifred, "this to the wretch that *was* my sister,—that is——"

"Your sister still," said Elfrida, with a proud and commanding voice. "Sigifred forbear, and hear me—Sir Edmund, go hence I implore you. I will speak alone with my brother,—I will tell him all.—He is noble, though rash and violent. —Retire Sir Edmund, I beseech you."

While she hastily uttered these words, Elfrida, with one hand fixed upon the cloak of her brother, and the other directed toward Edmund, with a motion that urged him to depart, maintained her position between the two in such a way as to prevent the former from rushing upon Edmund without using actual violence toward herself. Edmund stood for one moment

irresolute what to do. To remain would prolong this painful scene, and might still farther exasperate the fury of Sigifred, and enhance the danger of a fatal, or at least a bloody catastrophe. In the looks of Sigifred he could read a vindictive fury which nothing but the last extreme of vengeance could allay. To shed the blood of the brother of Elfrida, he could not endure,—but neither could he tamely submit to be himself a victim. On the other hand, to retire from the place at the threat of an armed man, and the entreaty of an apprehensive woman, would have a show of pusillanimity most galling to his proud spirit. These were, however, in him the feelings of an instant, and not thoughts slowly evolved as in our words. Replying promptly then, and disregarding the vituperations of Sigifred, who vainly endeavoured, with all but absolute violence, to free himself from the firm grasp of his sister,—he said, "To me rather, lady Elfrida, leave it to pacify your brother. Mad as he is,—and with just cause as he now thinks,—he will scorn to strike the man who keeps his sword undrawn. *I* will explain all.—You can-

not—must not, stand like a self-excusing criminal.—Sir Sigifred," he pursued,—speaking as well as he could during the short pauses made by the enraged and reviling youth,—" sheathe your sword—let your sister retire,—hear me, I conjure you.—I will tell you all.—I will be governed by you——"

But the rage of Sigifred was not to be calmed; and, with the most insulting epithets, he continued to address Edmund, while he fiercely refused to hearken to him. Edmund perceived that all attempts to calm him were useless; and a look from Elfrida, and a few energetic words, at length determined him to retire.

" Sir Edmund," said she, " if you be that which I have ever thought you,—if you do not more value your own pride of manhood than my happiness,—go hence."

He could not resist the look and tone with which this was spoken, but immediately bowed and left the hall. Proceeding hastily to his chamber, he put on his armour, and, with an agonized heart, prepared for sudden departure from the castle, which he anticipated as an una-

voidable event. Having done this, he awaited, in a state of gloomy dejection, the result of Elfrida's expostulation with her brother. A quick, but gentle tapping at the door at length aroused him; and, when he opened it, he beheld the maiden Beda who, with an alarmed look, put into his hand a small leaf of vellum, and immediately hasted away. Written in a hurried, and unpractised hand,—for Elfrida was as yet no dexterous scribe—he found the following words:

"I have opened my whole heart to Sigifred,—but he is inflexible, and enraged against you. He is hastening to find the Earl—the consequence to yourself I dare not think upon—we shall meet again,—but, for the present, must part. Fly instantly, I beseech you—your horse will be at the eastern gate—if you hesitate you will perish—and bring death upon me. Fly! I command—I conjure—I implore you—abide one day with Offa at Taunton. I will send a messenger there—let him bring me tidings of you. Stay not a moment here—or you are lost, and I for ever wretched!"

Edmund paused not an instant. His own

proud spirit would have prompted him to dare the worst,—but for Elfrida he would sacrifice every thing. Hastily he descended,—crossed the court, and the eastern portico,—found his horse at the gate,—mounted, and rode off. For a short distance, he permitted the gallant animal to put forth his speed; but checked him then; and, at a slow pace, held on his melancholy way. At the last point from which Maximus Castle could be seen, he paused; and, while he gazed upon it, gave vent to the grief which seemed almost bursting his heart. Offa had been well known to him during his late abode, with other warriors, in the castle of Ethelbert; and a mutual esteem had speedily arisen between them. Their liking to each other had not, however, had time to grow into a friendship: but it was sufficient to embolden Edmund to ask his hospitality for a day, and to procure from Offa an invitation to remain with him during a much longer period. But this kindness Edmund's utter dejection of mind would not permit him to accept. After a melancholy night, he arose early on the morrow, and anxiously expected the promised

messenger. The sun had not been long up when he arrived. Edmund saw, and instantly knew him to be the same who on the day before had awaited with his horse at the gate of the castle. He hurried to him, and received from his hands a parchment, curiously folded, and secured with silken threads. There was no superscription upon it, and it was signed with no name; neither was any necessary. Edmund retired; with a trembling hand unfolded the parchment, and read the following words:

"My hours have been as days of bitterness since you left me. You had scarcely quitted the castle when my father summoned me before him, and spoke to me as he had never before spoken. I love my father, and am sorry to grieve him. To all others he is proud, and impatient, but to me he has ever, till now, been gentle, and kind. I opened all my heart to him: but his anger was very great, and his threats against you very terrible, and his language ill suited to his high rank. Even from my father, I could not bear to hear you so reviled; and my pride and anger rose. Alas!

this but increased his own. He dismissed me with stern wrath, and with vows of vengeance upon you. I am very wretched; but I will not despair, for we are in the hands of God; and in Him do I put our trust. Wherever you go, may His protection go with you; and then, in the battle field, or in the quiet walls of the priory, you will still be secure. Let the messenger bring to me your letter, that I may know whither you take your way: and there shall my heart go with you. I ask you not oft-times to write to me, for that might to both be perilous; but to our gentle Ethelburga write often, and from her I shall hear tidings of you. Now may Christ bless and comfort you, and be with you in all your thoughts, and all your deeds!"

Edmund read, and re-read this simple epistle; and again and again impressed fervent kisses upon the parchment over which her beloved hand had moved. He then penned to Elfrida the following:

"My heart is crushed with misery! and I fear that my faults have brought it upon me. I have loved,—I still love,—I ever must love you,

with the purest, and the intensest love: but I ought to have buried it in my own bosom, and suffered my anguish in silence. For the present, think no more of me! Our country's destinies are at stake: I am going to the battle against her enemies. The brave man's sword has ere now lifted the humble to the highest ranks; and, if such should be my lot, I may deserve your love, and your father may allow of my suit to you. Till then, forget me. I must not, and I will not involve you in my own misfortunes. I am poor, and unknown: you are wealthy, and of high descent. I may fall in the battle, —I may come from it without glory,—I may never again behold you. Wait then the event. Meantime, seek anew your father's love,—and forget that of the unhappy and humble stranger. Tidings are rife that the Northmen are again in motion, and that a band of thanes, on the northern borders of Somerset, is gathering to oppose them. I shall this day depart to seek them out, and to join my poor strength with theirs. Think not of me more, till you shall hear that I have fallen in a glorious cause, or won renown among

the brave. If I perish, give to my memory a tear,—if I return with fame, expect that I will again seek you. Till then farewell: and may the grace of Christ be ever with you!"

This letter he gave to the messenger, together with a small piece of gold; and charged him to deliver it to the lady Elfrida with his own hand.

Immediately afterwards he wrote to the Earl another, in which he endeavoured to clear himself from all suspicion of dishonourable intentions; and protested his resolution to attempt nothing but with the full approbation of the Earl himself. This he forwarded by a messenger procured for him by Offa; then, after cordial thanks for the hospitality that had been shewn to him, mounted his horse, and slowly issued through the gates of the town.

We shall leave him to pursue his journey, while we present to the reader some more homely-seeming personages, who are, nevertheless, of consequence for furthering the progress of our story.

CHAPTER VIII.

The scene to which we now conduct our readers, is the inside of what may be called a farm-house, or perhaps rather the dwelling of a man who procured his living chiefly by the feeding and rearing of cattle. A small number of swine, under the more immediate management of his wife, contributed to their cares and their wealth; and, as there were no children to employ her time, the active and bustling dame fulfilled with expertness, and diligence, and with a no small sense of her own importance, the laborious duties of her swine-yard, and her dairy. The sole helpmate of the dame in her toil,—for the husband was commonly abroad about his own occupations,—was a red-cheeked, and red-armed girl, who, being at the present moment employed with the grunting charge without, and in no way necessary for our purpose, we shall at once dis-

miss. The apartments of the house were of a size very unusual in dwellings tenanted by persons of their class; and every thing bore the face of plenty and comfort. In the principal room, where blazed the plentiful wood fire upon the hearth, and the grimed vessels of cookery were seen, and the huge sides of smoke-dried bacon adorned the ceiling, and clustered close in the roomy chimney, stood the active dame, with plump bared arms kneading a heavy weight of dough into bread for the weekly consumption of the family. During the progress of her work, she held occasional talk with a man, apparently about thirty, or five-and-thirty, years of age, dressed in the coarse doublet of a peasant, who, seated in a chair of withy, at some distance from the glowing hearth, appeared divided betwixt his attentions to the converse of the good woman, and a small vellum-bound book to which, during the intervals of discourse, he seemed to give a far more delighted attention. The back of the woman was turned toward him; but, not unfrequently, she reverted her head to hear, or to make a reply, or to see what her companion was

about. After a pause somewhat longer than those which had preceded it, she cast back one of these glances, and saw that he was more deeply than ever absorbed. Upon his left knee, which, by means of a rough, three-legged, stool under the foot, was elevated so as to serve the purpose of a table, he held the parchment book; and, in his right hand, a quill, which, ever and anon, he dipped into an earthen vessel, containing a dark-coloured fluid. With musing look, and after many a glance, now sidelong, now downward, and now toward the bacon-crowned ceiling, he proceeded to make upon the parchment leaves a scratching sound with the quill aforesaid, which, as it moved on, left behind it sundry uncouth marks. Now dame Swetha considered this to be a strange child's play for a man of his years. Every now and then too she perceived that what he had taken so much pains to scratch in, he all at once scratched over again with one broad black line; and then she said inwardly, "Ay—just like t'other childer,—up wi' the mud, and down wi' the mud. Now who, that didn't see what I do see, would think a good looking hand-

some fellow like thick sich an innocent? And yet he can talk well enew at times, and just as well may be as I can myself, only that he don't hold to't,—but then, to be sure, he's bin mortal bad, and not had the right use oth' tongue o' him."

She had indulged for a short time in this inspection of her guest, and in the inward commentary which his appearance and employment suggested to her, when she lost patience, and, in a somewhat querulous tone, again addressed him.

"I wish to goodness now, Sir Iddlerid," said she, leaning one doubled hand upon the dough, and placing the other upon her hip,—"that you'd some better thing to do than sit scratting crooked lines that way upon a bit o' sheep skin. You're well enew, and strong again now man: what should hinder you to go out wi' my Den to the cattle fields, or help Effy feed the swine,—and then you'd do summat to earn your bread wi'."

"My good Swetha," said the man, smiling, and closing his book upon the forefinger of his left hand, as he turned aside toward the dame, "all men, you know, have their peculiar callings,

and no man is qualified for labours to which he has never been accustomed."

"Fiddle faddle,—don't tell me," was the answer of the woman,—"I should like to know the man ever was born that couldn't give wash to the swine, or keep eye on the cattle, just to see that they didn't break bounds, or drown i' th' marsh. Here's six weeks or more that you've been wi' us,—and the only stroke o' work that you've earned bread wi' was the chopping o' th' faggots yesterday,—for, as for looking after the young chicks and ducklins, that you're so fond o'—and flinging em' a handful of oats at whiles,—why that's not much, I count, for a man to get living by. Mortal ill you ha' bin, to be sure, and could'nt ha' worked if you would ever so : but ye're over it now,—and, to my mind, ye're stronger, both arm and leg, than my Denny, or mayhap me either : and what for then should'nt you put hand to work o' some sort, and not sit glow'ring over the book, and scratting wi' the goose quill o' that fashion all day."

"Well Swetha," replied the man, with perfect good humour,—"I am willing, as I have be-

fore told you, to give my assistance in any slight matter to which I may be equal. But you must not over-task me, for I am still weak; and you must not expect me to do aught which requires skill and practice that I do not possess. I am sure you will believe that I am very grateful to you for the kind services which you have rendered me; and, depend upon it, I shall some day be able to repay you in a better way than by any trifling labour that I could now perform for you."

"Pay?—I dont want thee to pay, man. Thee'rt welcome to what thee'st had,—and grateful enew, as thee calls't it, hast thee bin: and, for the matter o' that, I'm as grateful as thee beest for having done thee a Christian turn: but, plague take 't, I do not abide to see a man wi' no one thing to turn his hand to, fro' morning to night, but that scratting pen and book, that deafs my ears more than the lowing o' all Den's cows at milking time. I'd rather pay *thee* to see thee work like a man, than be paid myself to look at thee wasting thy precious days i' that fashion."

"Well but Swetha," mildly rejoined the man, "the book and the pen have been among

my chief employments, and I take great pleasure with them."

"Then more's the shame and pity!" retorted the woman: "and is that'n the way that all you thaanes,—for Demy tells me that once you *ha'* 'bin a thaane,—and well anew can I believe him, for sartinlye you dont look like a man, as other men,—is that'n the fashion that all you thaanes waste your time wi' scrat, scrat, scrat, all day?"

"Very few of us, I fear," answered her companion;—"right glad should I be if none of us had worse occupations."

"No fear o' that I'm bold to think, sir Iddlerid," rejoined the dame: "I dont see, for my part, what worse you would ha', than for a man to sit wasting his precious time i' that gate, when he has arms and legs to work wi'. But I've other things to do than to stand chaffering wi' you. Take your own way, as Rinnie said to th' pig when he wouldn't i' no fashion go the way he wanted him: only I'd much liefer you'd deaf my ears wi' a mill clapper than wi' that scratting goose quill."

So saying, she turned round, and with double

energy renewed her fist-work upon the dough. Her guest returned to his book; and some time elapsed in silence, broken only by an occasional burst of some rustic song, which the dame began to sing in time to the motion of her arms, and, as hastily again, suppressed. But she had at length brooded to the full extent of her patience over the idleness of her inmate; and now turned round in her former attitude to renew the controversy.

"Thaane you ha' bin, you say. Now, Sir Iddlerid, wouldn't it ha' bin far the better for you if, so please God, you'd a bin a honest lab'ring man, that could earn his bread wi' his own hand afore he eat it? I can't see, for my part, what sich cattle as they thaanes could ever ha' bin made for, if it been't for the sins o' the people, and to eat up the fat, and drink down the strong, like to the locusts that ate up all the land o' Igypt, as Father Winivid told us out o' scripter, —thof that was a queer thing, surelye, for them creturs to make their dinner o': but I count they must ha' bin a sort o' earth worms, and so it came nat'ral to 'em like."

Her guest smiled; and, with a grave shake of the head, replied that he "feared many of them were even but too much like the locusts she spoke of."

"And mayhap then," replied she, "you think yourself better than the rest o' 'em: but they say it's an ill bird fouls his own nest. And now just tell me, Sir Iddlerid, as you can't do any one useful thing as I know of, unless it be chopping faggot wood,—just tell me, I say, what is it you *ha'* done, for I count ye can't ha' sat all your life wi' a book i' th' one hand, and a scratting thing i'th' t'other. What *ha'* ye done,—what *ha'* ye done?"

"Why, my good Swetha," replied her guest, again laying aside his pen, and turning towards her, "one of my duties has been to sit in the assemblies of the Witenagemot with my peers, and study to make laws for the good of the nation."

"Make laws!"—ejaculated the dame scornfully,—"ah, Sir Iddlerid, much more to th' purpose would it be for honest men to stay at home and keep the laws. Them that make, know how

to break, I've heard folk say. And for what should you, or the best man i'th' Wittigmot, go about to make laws for? Didn't God his-self make laws, o'th' top of Mount Sinnei, and cut 'em all out i' stone, and give 'em to Mooses to carry down to the Childer of Isrel? And do you think God didn't know how to make laws better than the like o' you? Now, to tell you my mind Sir Iddlerid, I do think this is clean blasfimmy, or worse, if worse there be,—and small's the wonder that God has sent they bloody dogs o' Daanes to punish the land for such flying i'th' face o' him. I wonder ye arn't all ashamed o' yourselves, to sit, as you say, wi' pears in your hand, taking his name i' vain i' that fashion. But you can't be eating pears all day, and, besides, they be n't i' season all the year round: and what for you should eat 'em at all, passes my wit to understand."

"You mistake me, Swetha," answered her guest, with difficulty suppressing a smile, "I told you that I sat with my peers, meaning thereby not the fruit called pears, but the nobles of the country, my equals and fellows."

" Ay,—and queer fellows they be, I'm thinking,—some o' 'em,"—said the dame. " And I should like to know what King Alfred would say to you, if he were to know what sort of blasfimmus work ye had in hand, taking away God's laws, and making new 'uns o' your own. My sarty! but he'd gi'e it you."

" The king frequently sits with us," replied the other, " and no law can be made at all without his consent at the last,—so that ———."

" The king sit wi' *you?*" exclaimed the woman, in a tone of scorn, and disbelief. " And dost thee think now, Sir Iddlerid, to fool me i' this'ns? I didn't think thee'd tell me a lie like that'n, and I'm sorry to ha' to think it o' thee. Thee see'd the king!—For shaam! for shaam!"

" Indeed, Swetha, I speak the truth,"—rejoined her guest, with a good-humoured tone, and a smile, " The king sits frequently in the assembly of the ——."

" For shaam! I tell thee,—for shaam!" cried the woman, shaking her forefinger at the speaker, and assuming a look of stern displeasure: " I didn't think it o' thee:—thee that pray'th like a

saant, and looketh at times like a very 'postle i' th' testiment, that Father Winivid shewed I and Den,—only that thee hathn't the blue and red gown, and the cretur at the foot o' thee. I didn't think it o' thee."

Uttering this reproach, she turned her back upon the man, and resumed her work. But she did not, as before, break out into snatches of song; her face expressed deep and subtle thought, and she was, in truth, projecting how to detect and confound her false speaking companion. Thinking herself now about to dumbfound him, and make him heartily ashamed of his falsehood, she turned round; and, with a look of keen shrewdness, such as a sharp barrister assumes when putting to a witness some question which he expects will utterly overwhelm him, proceeded thus.

"And so, Sir Iddlerid, you've see'd the king, ha' you?"

"Yes, in truth, good Swetha, have I,—very often," replied her guest, turning his head a little toward her, but still keeping open his book, as

if hoping that the interruption would be a short one.

This seeming indifference did not please the dame, for she wished that the terrors of her countenance should have full weight upon the culprit.

" I think, Sir Iddlerid," said she, in the tone of offended dignity, " that when I leave my work in hand, which is o' some consequence, it would be no more than manners o' you to leave yours, which cannot be o' no consequence at all in the 'varsal world."

" Really, my good Swetha," rejoined her guest, instantly closing the book upon one finger, and turning full upon her, " I beg your forgiveness. I thought perhaps ——."

" Maybe you do," said she, with a haughty bend and toss of the head,—" and reason good, I trow. Well then, Sir Iddlerid,—as you've see'd the king, as you say, I've a sort o' curosity to hear you tell what sort o' a man he's like to. You can tell that'n, I do suppose, you that ha' see'd him so often."

" Why—yes, Swetha," replied he, " I may

perhaps be able to describe him to you. But he differs very little from other men, as far as I can perceive, ——"

Here the dame smiled, and gave a gentle side-long nod that seemed to say, "now I have thee." Her guest did not observe it, and went on.

"He is not an ill-looking man: has rather a grave face,—blue eyes,—brownish hair,—in stature somewhat about my height."

"That's it!" exclaimed Swetha, with a start-ling noise, and a heavy slap of her right hand upon the table, which made the flour rise in a cloud, "that's it! I thought I should catch ye. I'm ashaamed o' ye—I'm ashaamed o' ye."

"Why,—what is the matter now?" said he, in astonishment.

"Matter?" she cried, with a tone and look of scorn; "Matter? dost thou say? Oh no great matter to be sure,—only that I've caught thee i' the biggest lie ever was told—that's all the matter?

"But how? Swetha," demanded he, with his imperturbable good nature.

"How?" she replied, with an air of contempt.

" I'll tell thee how. Dont thee think to come over me wi' thy lies, for I've see'd a man that *hath* see'd a king,—and that was king Arthur, or else his ghost, and that's the same thing, I trow : for it isn't like that ghosts go on growing after the body's in the ground ;—and one king, I reckon, is like another king :—and this king Arthur, or his ghost, that Ludecan saw i' Glassunbury church-yard,—and, if he hadn't bin a proper ghost, durst he ha' come i' that holy place, think ye ?—this king Arthur was aumost as big as Burrough-bridge church,—for Ludecan looked up at the church when he told me the tale, and said he'd make oath, if so be that the priest asked 'un—that he didn't want but a foot or so oth' top ;—and that the belly o' him were bigger than the tower : and he'd a crown on th' head o' him, that shined brighter nor the sun : and his armour were all gold, and jewels,—and his shield were as big as the church-yard, and fire came out o' it,—and his sword, that he carried in's hand, were just like a flame o' lightning,—and when he talked it were louder than thunner,—and Ludecan couldn't look at him—and tumbled on the

ground, and clean lost his senses. And when he came to again, where should he lay but outside his own door,—and his wife Tata, and all the neighbours that see'd him, said he looked for all the world like a mazed man, or a drunken. And then he told 'em right off all that he'd see'd: and more than a score o' men be there that will make oath to't.—And now, what dost thee think o' thyself, to sit there telling lies i' thatns o' seeing king Alfred, that thy eyes durst not look on,—and o' him sitting with thee, and th' other fellows, as thee call'st 'em, making laws ith' Wittigmot,—and he no bigger than thyself,—him that lives in a castle o' gold and silver.—Ah! Sir Iddlerid, I didn't think this o' thee,—Fie,—for shaam!—fie for shaam! Get on wi' thy scratting,—it's all thee'rt fit for, I count.—I've done wi' thee! I've done wi' thee!"

She turned round, with a quick shake of the head, after this severe lecture, and set doggedly to her kneading. Nor could her guest, for some time, obtain more from her, in reply to his words, than a deep and prolonged "ha!" accompanied by another angry shake, which expressed her

total disbelief in his assertions. Some absurdities which he pointed out in the story, and a suggestion that the said Ludecan might very probably have been overtaken in drink at the time when the ghost appeared to him,—since the very neighbours, according to her own account, thought he had the look of a mazed man, or a drunken,—appeared at length, however, to subdue the violence of her headshake, and the energy of her scornful "ha!" and, after a time, though she worked doggedly on, and never turned her head toward the speaker, or appeared at all to notice him, yet she gave no outward sign of her former contempt and disbelief. It is probable that some doubts of the strict veracity of the said Ludecan were rising in her mind; for, after a mutual silence of some duration, she turned round with an appeased countenance, and renewed the discourse.

"Weil, Sir Iddlerid," said she,—"it *was* a queer story, that o' Ludecan,—and I don't deny that once on a time I found him out in another odd tale, sure enew,—and that's was about—but, howsomever, that's neither here nor there:

and so, as I can't make you believe i' the story, why I'll say no more on't: but then mind, if you don't believe about seeing king Arthur, or his ghost,—thof some folks do say that he's not dead after all,—and that he'll some day be upon us again, and take all the kingdom to his self,—as he did no man know'th how many years by gone, —and so, if so be that he ben't dead at all, why then sartin 'tis that Ludecan couldn't ha' see'd the ghost o' him,—and so, as I was saying Sir Iddlerid, if thee wont believe what I do tell about king Arthur,—why then dont thee look for I to believe what thee saith about king Alfred,—that's all,—and that's fair, aren't it?"

Her guest made no immediate reply; and perhaps she did not desire one, for she instantly went on.

"But after all, Sir Iddlerid,—if a thaan you be, and ha' sitten i'th' Wittigimot, sartinlye ye can't ha' sitten there all day from Yule to Yule, scratting with the quill, and making laws. Ha' ye never had nought else to spend your time wi'?"

"Why—yes, Swetha," replied her companion after a short pause, "I have learned how

to shoot with the bow, and to throw the lance, and to use the sword and battle-axe: and sometimes I have commanded soldiers in the field."

"Ah! bloody work! bloody work that!" exclaimed she with a shudder. "Who'd ha' thought that o' *thee*, that looketh quieter than a monk, and softer-hearted than a woman?—Worse this than t'other! Better ha' staid at home scratting wi' thy quill, than go out to cut the throats o' Christian men like thyself. I can't think it o' thee! I dont think thee couldst put thy knife into a hog,—let alone a Christian."

"Nay but Swetha," he rejoined, "these enemies were not Christians, but pagans,—ferocious Danes, who came to destroy us,—and who ——"

"Well, well,"—said she, "if they were Daans, that's clean another thing: for they cattle are nowt better than incarnid devils, as I've heard Father Winivid say,—and so the sooner they be sent to hell, why the better for us that ha' souls to save. But then its but seldom they thieves are at their black work,—and so ye can't ha' had much o' your time taken up wi' sword

and spear flashery. Isn't there one single useful thing ye can turn your hand to?"

"Much of my time," he answered, "has been occupied by learning to read, and to write ——"

"Sha! sha! sha! man," ejaculated she, with scorn,—"dont thee tell me o' that nonsense."

"And in learning to reckon with figures," continued he.

"And what good's that? I should like to know. Dost think I can't count my pigs and poultry, and Den his cattle wi' our notched sticks, wi'out larning figgers? A fine sortment ha' you made, Sir Iddlerid, by my troth, o' the most useless and nonsense-like waste-o-times that sure ever mortle cretur heard tell o'."

"I have, besides," continued he, "spent some time in learning the language of the Romans, who were once the masters of this island, and indeed of almost all the world,—and who have left behind them here many of their manners, and customs, and laws, and ——"

"Laws? what! And *they* made laws too?" exclaimed she, "the heathen loons! And isn't God's blessed Saxon tongue, good enough for

the like o' thee? Isn't eggs eggs? and isn't bacon bacon? i'th' one tongue as well as t'other? And dont thee know that the holy St Josiph o' Harrimathea came from Christ himself to Glassumbury, and planted the holy thorn there, that's alive till this day to tell o' it,—and that he talked to the people i' Saxon,—for, if so be he didn't, what was the use of his talking at all, I should like to know,—and he talked I reckon the same langige as his Blessed Master,—and istn't the langige that the Saver talked the best langige? I should ha' thought *that* might ha' served thy turn, Sir Iddlerid, that did well enew for the blessed St Josiph, and for our Lord. Well, my sarty! this is nothing but worse and worse! and I can't think how 'tis I dont rid the house o' thee. Thee canst neither feed swine, nor tent cattle, nor brew, nor bake, nor plough, nor sow, nor reap, nor thrash, nor weave, nor make shoe for man or beast,—nor do any one useful thing in this 'varsal world! Sich a poor, profitless do-no-good as thee beest, never were eyes o' mine clapped on afore! and God send they never may be again! Out o' thee!

Coulds't pull up a fish, dost think, if 'twere fixed o' thy hook?"

After first correcting the good woman's mistake respecting the language in which Christ and his Apostles spoke, and assuring her that the Bible was by no means written in the Saxon tongue; and that, in truth, almost the only Bibles, as he believed, then in the island, were in the Roman tongue,—her guest told her that, though no expert angler, he had perhaps sufficient skill to take a fish, if such there were in the neighbouring river, and that, at her desire, he would certainly endeavour to do so, and thus supply something towards his daily food, while he remained with her.

The former part of his statement, which, from the simplicity and solemnity of his manner, she could not disbelieve, appeared to give her much higher notions of the dignity of the Latin language, and consequently of this accomplishment in her guest.

The concluding offer to try his skill with the angling rod seemed to show his willingness to do what he could, at least, for earning his bread;

and this she internally pronounced to be "summat good i'th' chap, after all." With a much more placid tone, therefore, she again addressed him.

"Well, well, Sir Iddlerid,—I'll not say but you may be right about the 'postle and the Scripter, because, thank God, I never wasted my time wi' larning to read: and if Scripter *is* i' Latin, why may be you might do worse,—if larn you must,—than larn to read Scripter,—and so no more o' that. But, fish i'th' river? didst say? Sure enew there be, and of all sorts, and plenty o' they too. Where did th' eel pie come from, dost think, that thee'st had for thy dinner, if it didn't come from th' river? And rare trout and salmon be there in it too,—and that's no sich bad eating neither when they been't spoiled i'th' cooking. There's my Den's own rod and line, and basket, hanging up at thy right hand, if thee hadst but eyes to see wi'. But thee bee'st as blind as a mowdewarp when the book nonsense is i' the head o' thee,—or else thee wouldstn't ha' let the black sow eat up half the new milk cheese under thy very

nose. My sarty, ye Wittigimot folks and thaans are rare hands for law-making, that can't keep a pig out o'th' dairy: and if it hadn't pleased God to stick your nonsense heads pretty tightish on the necks o' ye,—thof mayhap that was doing little good,—I reckon the furst thief that came along side ye might ha' whipped 'em off under his cloak, and you never the wiser. Come—stand out o' my way, and let me put the wood together. This is a special baking,—for my Den's sister and her husband, and may be two or three neighbours will be wi' us next Lord's day. And now, Sir Iddlerid, dost think that thee that know'th Latin, and canst talk i'th' Wittigimot, and scrat wi' th' pen, and what not beside,——dost think, I say, that thee'st wit enew to sit i' thy chair by the hearthstone, and turn they loaves o' bread when I puts 'em down to bake?"

"Why, yes, Swetha," replied her guest, "this is a task that I think I *can* perform: and I will cheerfully undertake it. Nothing more, I suppose, will be necessary than for me to turn them occasionally, as I have before seen you

do, so as to allow them to bake equally on all sides."

"Nothing more," said she, pursuing her work, —"and I do hope that same nothing more may not be too much for thee."

There was a short silence while the woman made her arrangements; and she then again addressed her guest.

"There now, Sir Iddlerid,—thee seest how I've put they loaves. Thee'lt just give 'em a turn i' this'ns—dost see? every now and then, —not oftner than need be,—but just to take caution that they bakes sweet and brown all over alike. But thee must ha' thy eyes i' thy head man, and not i' th' clouds, or i' thy book nonsense,—for if they ben't turned i' th' nick o' time, th' crust burns, and that makes waste. And so as thee knowst thee cansn't *earn* thy bread, like other folks that's had better bringing up, why thee'st less reason *to waste 'n*, I count. And thee'lt give a look to th' fire too, just to see that he burns steady; and between whiles throw a small log on,—but not over much. And now I must away to the dairy,—

for I've may be three days cream for the churn. But put aside thy book and thy goose quill man, or thee'lt be thinking more o' thy nonsense-scratting than o' my loaves. Thee mayst look a bit at Den's fish tackle; and that'll be more to th' purpose: and if the morning's fine, thee mayst be off, if thee wilt, by day-break, and try thy hand at a trout or so for thy breakfast: or to-night, if thou wilt: the time's just as good for sport; and a broiled trout's no bad food to sup on,—or even a jack, handled wi' skill i' th' cooking. But I'd fain see thee come home wi' a salmon i' thy hand man: and then I should know what to think o' thy hangling."

She looked carefully around, as she concluded this; and gave a finishing touch to the steady wood fire: again cautioned her guest to "keep a sharp eye to the loaves, and not addle his brains with that fool's book:"—received from him an assurance that he would endeavour to mind her injunctions,—and then,—but not without a look of doubt, and a slight shake of the head, accompanied by some half-muttered words, that seemed to express distrust of her guest's

capacity for the task she had assigned to him,—strode out of the room.

The countenance of the man, which had hitherto borne the expression of good natured endurance under a petty, but annoying, evil, speedily changed its character after the departure of the bustling housewife. His book was laid aside,—in compliance with the promise which he had given,—and for a short time he sat with eye intent upon the charge committed to him. The loaves were carefully turned,—though apparently with the manner of one performing a mechanical labour while the mind is otherwise occupied,—and the grave baker again filled his chair. He was in the act of performing the second revolution, when the door opened, and the face of dame Swetha appeared, clad in smiles of approbation.

"That's it man!—mind thy work!—there's a good chap!"—said she, and vanished.

He turned at the sound of her voice; but the smile upon his face was like a momentary touch of light on a dark landscape; and a heavy gloom settled instantly upon it. He threw himself in-

to the chair, and gazed with fixed and melancholy eye upon the fire. Ever and anon, he pressed together his closed palms, and appeared struggling with mental anguish: now, his lips moved, and his face was uplifted as if in earnest prayer,—and now he bowed his head, and groaned as though in the agony of hopeless wretchedness. A considerable time elapsed, and he was wholly unconscious of all about him. The sudden bursting open of the door,—the loud vociferation of the dame, and her rapid footstep, aroused him. At the same moment of time, he became aware that the loaves committed to his safe keeping were sending up a thick pungent smoke,—and that his right ear had received a ringing salute from the heavy palm of the enraged housewife.

"The fiend fly away wi' thee for an idle good-for-nothing loon!" cried she, snatching away in haste the burning loaves.—"Dost see? dost see? doited, pen-scratting villain that thee art! Get out o' th' house wi' thee, and never darken my door again! Thee canst eat the bread well enew, ill-looking deevil that thou art!—but thee cansn't

see it blazing afore thy nose. Out wi' thee, I say, out wi' thee!—don't tell me,—I'll teach thee what thee'st never larned yet,—out wi' thee! or by all the saints and martyrs I'll fling the ugly carcase o' thee at top oth' fire, and burn thee wi' thy own cakes! A profitless, idle, good-for-nothing, pen-scratting loon!—Ga 'way, I tell thee. I'll not hear thee.—Thee wus'nt? Then burn my fingers if I don't make thee."

It was in vain that the poor man,—evidently grieved at the consequence of his negligence,—strove to apologize for it, and to soothe the wrath of the dame. Accompanying her last words with the appropriate action, she snatched up the hot and blackened loaves from the floor,—where they lay scattered in all directions, together with divers implements that, in her fury, she had hurled from their place at the fire,—and with all her might sent loaf after loaf at the head of the luckless baker.

"Take that'n!" she cried, "and that'n! thou worse-than-nothing, lazy, beggar!—thee wusn't get out—wusn't thee? There then—take that'n!

—and that'n !—and that'n !—and that'n—and rid the house o' thee !"

The unfortunate man remained for a little time a patient endurer of the storm. The extremity of her fury prevented Swetha from taking a very correct aim at her mark; but she gradually drew nearer at every throw, so that, once or twice, he escaped the missile only by a quick motion of the head; and once, only by receiving upon his uplifted hand the stroke which would else have fallen upon his face. It was quite in vain for him to attempt to speak. The voice of the termagant was like the din of a battle close at hand,—her face was red as the sun going down among thunder clouds:—he yielded at length to the tempest; and passed deliberately through the door, at the moment that another blackened shot, with a rush that a modern might have compared to the passing of an eight-and-forty pounder, brushed close over his head, and carried with it the peasant's cap, which he had hastily put on when compelled to the retreat.

He did not neglect to shut the door; and his

enemy, satiated with vengeance, or perhaps exhausted in the strife, made no attempt to open it. The sounds within died away like retiring thunder. There was at first a loud railing, and a rattling of stools, pots, and various articles of wood and iron, that had been displaced,—then a smothered grumbling,—and finally a total silence. The ejected baker lingered at the door, and marked the calm; heard two or three heavy sighs, that might intimate exhaustion, or perhaps the first upbraidings of conscience ;—waited yet a little longer,—then gently opened the door, and advanced, with the intention of propitiating his wrathful, but now softened judge. The large wicker chair in which that personage was doubtless seated,—since she was no where visible,—stood with its high back towards him: and for a moment he made a pause, that his presence might be perceived before he too abruptly turned the awful headland of its far projecting side.

"Is that thee Den?" said the dame in a soft and dejected tone,—"A fine dish of fish is there here for thee, my sarty!"

"It is I, good Swetha," replied the man in a gentle voice. "Will you permit me to take the angling rod, and see if I can bring home a trout for our supper?"

There was no reply. He removed the rod and the basket from their place in the corner; and then advanced, with a slow light tread, and presented himself before the dame.

"I am very sorry for my negligence, good Swetha," he said,—"and I hope you will forgive me."

Still there was no answer. One arm of the offended matron hung over either side of the chair,—her feet were pushed forward,—her back was reclined,—her head was turned away from the suppliant. He ventured to take one of her capacious hands in his,—"I hope I have not offended you past all forgiveness, my kind Swetha," he again said, in a soft and rich tone. But there was no reply.

"I shall return at sunset," continued he, gently pressing her hand, "and I trust not without some reward of my labours."

But the dame was immoveable. He again

pressed her hand, and went softly out of the door.

There was for awhile no stir in the room. The chair at length uttered a creaking sound; and the face of dame Swetha was thrust forth. Apparently she thought that the repentant sinner might not yet have quitted the apartment: but a glance at the door assured her that he was no longer there.

She drew in her feet, and sat more forward, like one undetermined whether to rise, or not; passed her apron over her heated forehead, and drew a heavy breath.

"Well—I *ha*' bin in a thunnering rage sure-lye!"—said she at length, in a half audible tone. "And to see how yon soft spoken chap's come over me a'ter all. D'rat the face o' him—but he's an eye like a dove, and a voice like a nightingale! An' yet I've see'd'n glance like an eagle,—and heard 'n pray like an harchangel, when he's thought I warn't nigh to 'n. But Lord save's! what's he good for a'ter all. Can neither plough, nor sow, nor reap, nor thrash, nor churn,—nor tent cattle, nor swine,—nor

brew, nor bake—no, hang me if he can *bake!* ——but, howsomiver I musn't think o' that now, else I shall be coming round again,—and I ha' had enew for one day's meat I think.—Well Swetha,—thee must be up and doing lass,—for there's work plenty afore thee. A'ter all, I'm glad I didn't break the head o' him. D'rat me, if they loaves didn't make a dust and a thunner! —I wonder what Father Winivid would ha' said, if he'd see'd'n.—But talking's no walking —and I ha' got up-hill work afore me to set this job to rights.—And hang me if I ha'nt left the butter half churned!"

Bouncing up as this thought occurred to her, Swetha hastened from the room; and the dairy presently resounded with the measured strokes of the churning rod, and the uplifted voice of the toil-loving dame.

CHAPTER IX.

We must now return to our hero, whom we left just setting out on his journey from Taunton. It was about the hour of noon; and a bright sun, with a warm spring breeze, might have rendered the ride delightful to him, had his mind been open for enjoyment. But, though all around him was bright and beautiful, all within was dark and dreary. The world was all before him,—but, in the vast space, there was no longer any point to which he might give the fond name of home. Hoping that night to reach Glastonbury, where probably he might hear intelligence by which to shape his after progress, he turned down the Roman road, which, long disused as a carriage-way, still gives to the foot-passenger, for a short distance, a stony and rough path betwixt the town of Taunton and the village of Bathpool, loitered a

short time to contemplate the huge tumulus on the right, which then bore, and still bears, the name of Creech-borough Hill, crossed the ford of the Tone, and, regaining the broad way, slackened insensibly the reins, and fell into a train of melancholy musing which so completely absorbed his mind, as to make him wholly regardless of the motions of his horse. From this mental abstraction he did not recover till the day was far spent; and he then, to his astonishment, found that a small conical hill, which he supposed to be the Tor Hill of Glastonbury, stood apparently within a mile of him. He looked, however, in vain for the vast monastery of which he had heard so much. A river was at his right hand; and, at his left, and before him, large morasses, and woods of alder. He was about to quicken his pace, that he might reach some low buildings which he descried at the foot of the conical hill, when a peasant, bearing in his hand a clumsy angling rod, and a basket at his back, appeared advancing from the river. Edmund therefore drew bridle, and awaited his approach, that he might make inquiries of

him. The dress of the man intimated that he belonged to the humble class of labourers; but there was, in his gait and air, somewhat that did not agree with that character. His walk was slow, and his eyes were fixed on the ground, as if in mental dejection, or deep thought. There was a gracefulness, and even dignity, in his motions, such as Edmund had never before seen in any man of the humbler class; and his countenance, as he drew nigher, had that indefinable expression which, under every garb, distinguishes the intellectual mind. He appeared not to notice the horseman, now waiting at but a short distance before him beneath the shadow of a large elm-tree; and it was with a visible surprise that he heard the first words addressed to him.

"The good evening to you, my friend," said Edmund; "May I crave of you to know what place lies before me, and at what distance I am now from the town and abbey of Glastonbury."

The man did not reply till he had advanced within a few feet of the horseman, whom he

appeared to regard with an inquiring eye, as if doubtful whether the questioner were known to him or not; then answered, with a grave and rich voice, and with the manner of one addressing an equal, "The place which you see about a mile distant, is named Burrough-Bridge, and you are yet sixteen miles from Glastonbury."

"Now the saints defend me!" replied Edmund, in astonishment, "Have I been since the hour of noon ——. But what distance then from Taunton hither?"

"Nine miles," answered the peasant; "but, as the road at this season is in parts swampy and broken, you may well have consumed two good hours in that distance."

Edmund had known nought of the difficulties of the way.

"St Ethelmund be my help!" he answered, "I must surely have wandered from the path; for, since the sun told noon, have I been upon the road; and well did I hope, when I saw yon hill before me, that I might have reached Glas-

tonbury, where I designed this night to take up my lodging."

"You are then a stranger to these parts, and to Glastonbury, Sir Knight," rejoined the peasant, "or you could not have mistaken this small mound for the proud height of Glastonbury. But, unless your business be of a kind that permits no delay, I would caution you, Sir Knight, to go no farther upon your road, till you have the morning before you. The way is broken, and not easy to find: report, moreover, speaks night-journeying dangerous in these troubled times, when the law sleeps, and every bad man's hand is lifted against his fellows."

"I thank you for your counsel," replied Edmund. "For my business—it is not very exactly known to myself, and it matters little to me where I lay my head for the night. Can you point out to me, my good friend, any place where, for money, or for Christian charity, I may have food, and a night's lodging for myself and horse, since I am not yet soldier enough, at this season, to take my couch supperless amid these marshy fields."

"In the hamlet at the foot of the little hill before you," answered the peasant, "you will find a small inn, where your horse may be stabled, and where you will find, as I am told, good ale, barley bread, and savoury bacon, for your supper: but likely enough it is that the house may be filled with other guests,—and perhaps such as you would rather not consort with. I speak ignorantly, however, and rather of what I opine probably to be, than of aught that I can surely affirm."

"I must bide my chance," said Edmund. "A soldier may not pick his company like a courtier. Thanks, and a good night to you, my friend."

So saying, he waved his hand, and moved onward.

"Stay yet a moment," cried the peasant, "and tell me, so please you Sir Knight, what rumour stirs now in the west: we of this lonesome spot hear not always that which is bruited abroad; and, in times like these, even the poor peasant must be curious to learn, and to talk of state affairs. Any tidings of the Northmen, hear you

now, Sir Knight?—or of the king?—or, of the nobles in the west, what rumour lives?"

"The Northmen, as I hear," replied Edmund, "begin to move; and threaten wider devastation;—but this report speaks doubtfully; and I aver it not for truth: of the king, nothing is known; but men's tongues are busy with him. Some say he lies oppressed with his old malady, —some that he has deserted his people in their hour of danger, and sought safety in France,— some that he is himself deserted by his nobles,— and some that he is dead. But well I ween that never was vessel at more perilous hour left without a pilot at her helm: and whether with him, or with others, lies the blame—if blame it be— great assuredly is the crime, and great will be God's punishment. For the nobles of the west, they have, as I hear, gathered each his strength in his own castle, resolved to resist to the last. But there is among them no union, nor will any one submit to another the chief rule. Some report there is abroad of a new king to be chosen by them, but his name has not been heard; nor can I vouch for the truth of the story. In

Castle Maximus, which I left yesterday, the rumour is, however, rife: and if Alfred appear not soon to rally round him, if so he can, the hearts that burn to meet the enemy, much is it to be hoped that some other may be lifted to the power which he has abandoned, or can no longer sway."

While Edmund spoke these words, the peasant looked upon him with an expression that indicated the keenest interest: and, after a short pause, during which Edmund could not remove his eyes from the rivetting gaze of the peasant, the latter again addressed him.

"And Ethelbert,—is he then the man whom they would make king? Well is he known to be daring, and ambitious of power—but yet—May I crave of you, Sir Knight, one courtesy, and not incur your displeasure? I would fain ask of you your name, and upon what errand you are now bound. Think me not, humble as I am, a talkative and busy knave, that would pry into affairs of other men, which concern him not. There is in your countenance that of which I would gladly know more: and haply, if we

speak freely together, it may be the better for both."

Edmund was astonished at so abrupt a question, and for a moment remained silent.

"Your speech and air," he said at length, "are not of the class which your garb denotes. Were my name or rank likely to be of moment in any question that can arise between us, surely would I answer you; for in you also do I discern that which I would, at fitter time, gladly know better. Thus much, however, believe, that, if that name should still remain unknown to you, so is it little worthy of your enquiry. For my errand, it is that of a soldier desirous to signalize himself against the enemy, and hasting to join the first standard that may be raised in the cause of his country. Rumour speaks of such somewhere toward the north-east of Somerset, and thitherward am I bound. If, for such barren tale, you have in requital aught that may serve to direct my course, I shall rest your thankful debtor:—if not, let me pass on before the night overtakes me."

"The rumour, Sir Knight," replied the pea-

sant,—" is, I fear me, untrue. Horsemen from the east passed the bridge but this morning, who, as I understand, speak doubtfully thereupon. I urge you not to return whence you came,—yet would I counsel that, for the space of a few days, you should delay your journey, and await farther tidings: so may you perhaps avoid labour and disappointment. For the courtesy that you have shown to me, receive my thanks: and, as your entertainment at the hostelry of Burrough Bridge cannot but be humble, and your chance of lodging there precarious, right glad shall I be if you will rather accept a couch and supper under the lowly roof where I am myself at present a guest. There will be warm stabling for your horse, Sir Knight, and a bed of heath-down for yourself. For your supper, wheaten cakes, and good ale, and the produce of my evening's fishing, this dainty salmon: and such, to the palate of a hungry traveller, may be deemed no unsavoury food. With the morrow you may, if so minded, depart upon your way; and, meantime, for the night you will be secure; and we may pass away

the hours of evening in talk such as may perhaps be not unpleasant, or unprofitable to us."

There was in this singular person a dignity of manner, a look of high intellect, an expression of benevolence, and entire candour of soul, and a tone of power, mingled with courtesy, such as Edmund had till then never met with in man, and which instantly attracted his love, and commanded his respect. His own heart seemed to make, as it were, a sudden spring towards him, as the stranger uttered this frank invitation, and with equal unreservedness he hasted to embrace it.

"Frankly do I accept your offer," said he, leaping from his horse, and holding forth his hand to the peasant; "Lead on then, and let us strive to be each the better known to the other. We have both some little mystery to reveal. To me you have to declare that you are something greater than you seem,—and to you must I confess that I seem somewhat much greater than I am. My horse and armour may bespeak wealth and rank, but I am truly a humble youth, hitherto dependant upon the love and

goodness of one who has now abandoned me; and henceforward at the disposal of fortune, or, as I would rather say, of that Providence who will never, I am sure, forsake such who place their trust in Him."

"And in Him place ever thy trust," rejoined the peasant, grasping the hand of Edmund, and looking upon him, as they walked ownward, with a smile of warm approbation,—"Place ever thy trust in Him, my brother; and, whatever may befall thee, rest satisfied that, in the end, it will be best for thee. And now, in requital of your confidence, Sir Knight, I will avow to you that I have not been always that which I now seem to be. I have been among the mighty of the land; but I am dispossessed of my inheritance, and the house of my fathers knoweth me no longer. My name you may call Ethelred; but of my fortunes seek not now farther to know. Your own you have partly revealed to me; and with justice might demand of me an equal openness of heart; yet, for the present, ask me not farther to speak of myself; the hour perchance is not distant when I may unburthen all my sor-

rows to you; and each may then be to the other a cheering and strengthening counsellor. And now, Sir Knight, may I crave to know your name; for, though many of the barons of this land are known to me, yet is your face hitherto a stranger to my eyes."

"Call me not knight, or baron," Edmund replied, "for to such title I have no claim. I am but a poor adventurer, unpractised in war, and with no merit save that of a good will to serve my country. My whole estate lies in my horse and armour, and some few gold coins in a purse which has never been filled but from the bounty of my generous protector. My name is Edmund,—my parents I never knew, nor heard of. It was in the monastery of Croyland that my first years were passed: but the Northmen plundered and burned it, and put to death all whom they found within the walls, save me only. A kind brother by whom I was beloved, brought me, while yet a child, to the priory of Cothelstone: and there was I seen, and adopted, by the good and noble Leofric, who has now, by the slander of an enemy, been turned against me. This is

the simple story of my life. I am at present an outcast,—separated from all whom I love; and, but for the sake of one of whom I am unworthy, heedless how soon I lay down that life which must be henceforth as a dreary wilderness to me."

"Say not so, my young friend," replied Ethelred, "for, as a fellow scholar in the hard school of adversity, let me so call you. To every man hath Providence appointed his station in the world, and meted out to him his portion of suffering, and of happiness. Life ought not to be prized by us according to that which we may enjoy, but according to the duties which we can perform: and, while suffering under adversity, many such are there of which, during prosperity, we never think. Consider it thus, my friend, and haply thy state of trial may seem to thee better and richer than thy former state of happiness. But we come now to a path which will require cautious treading. Follow heedfully in my steps, and have a care that your horse swerve not aside, for the ground to either hand of the path is a deep swamp, from which he might find it not easy to free himself."

Edmund thanked his guide, and proceeded to obey his directions. They had hitherto advanced upon a tolerably firm road, having at their right hand the river, and, at their left, morasses, and woods of alder, mingled with grey willow; but they now turned suddenly to the left, and began to thread a narrow path through low bushes, and reedy quagmires. The ground bent and heaved beneath their tread; and the horse, with instinctive caution, snuffed the earth as he went on, and stepped slowly and lightly as if apprehensive that the yielding turf might burst beneath his weight. The bittern and the moor-fowl started up on either hand; and the air was filled with clouds of gnats, and resounded with the hoarse croaking of frogs. More than once Edmund expressed his fear that the earth would give way beneath the weight of his horse; but his guide bade him place trust in him, and hold on unfalteringly.

"The danger here," said he, "as in many of the paths of life where we are beset with difficulties and perils, lies less in advancing than in hesitating, or turning back. The wise man

weighs first the toil and the danger against his strength and his resources, but, when he hath once set foot upon the way, not for light matter doth he turn him back."

"But I," said Edmund, "know nought of the toil and the peril——"

"And therefore," answered his guide, interrupting him, "you have put yourself under the direction of one to whom they *are* known, and who will not deceive you. And in this we see the value of friendly counsel, and wise guidance in the many things of which, in himself, every human being must be ignorant. Man must, through life, take much upon trust from other men, since of his own knowledge he can understand so little of the things which make for his good, or for his evil. Let him then prove well the instructor to whom he leaneth, lest he be led astray by the wicked or the foolish; but, having proved, and found him true, and wise in that which he teacheth, let him not, at every danger or hardship, begin to mistrust, and to hearken rather to his own ignorant fears than to the instructions of that better guide."

"But I," said Edmund with a smile, "have now trusted to one whom I have never proved——"

"Yet thou knowest well," replied Ethelred, —"for thy heart hath assured thee of it,—that in me thou may'st, unproved, place thy reliance. There is a language, not of words, by which soul speaketh to soul, giving assurance of faith, or of falsehood: and, as I know of thee that I might, in greater peril than this, place my life upon thy uprightness,—so dost thou of me know that thy well-being is not less sacred to me than my own." He paused awhile, and then in a more solemn tone continued; "Yet the heart of man is deceitful; and oft-times he clotheth his face in hypocrisy difficult to see through. Put not therefore always thy trust in the fair seeming man. Oh! hard indeed is it to counsel, or to judge, aright, since—even as in this path—the peril which we shun on the one hand, we may so easily fall into on the other. But our danger is now past, and the firm ground is again beneath us."

Edmund looked up when his guide concluded, and saw before him an open space of gently rising

ground, in the centre of which stood a tolerably large, and comfortable-looking house. A blue smoke rose from the roof; and before the door stood milking pails, and various other utensils of a dairy. A middle aged woman, of portly size, and florid complexion, was busied in washing these, while she appeared to be holding discourse with some one within the building.

"Our good hostess,"—said Ethelred, in a low tone to Edmund,—"somewhat free of speech, and not a little jealous of her authority within this her kingdom; but a kind-hearted and cheerful soul, when not crossed in her humours, or disobeyed in her mandates."

Elevating then his voice as he drew nigher, "I bring you a guest for the night, good Swetha," he said, "and,"—holding up the salmon,—"somewhat to cheer the supper board withal; and right glad shall we both be when it shall please you to let us partake of it. Is the good man within?"

Swetha looked with surprise and reverence upon the mailed warrior, and his stately steed; and, making a lowly obeisance, gave Edmund a

cheerful welcome. Then, turning to Ethelred, "Ay, ay," she said, "in is he, sure enough,—and hunched up like a hedgehog there over the bit of scrawled parchment that ye know of, Sir Iddlerid, and that he minds much more, greater's the pity! than he does his hogs or his neat cattle. But that's a fine salmon for once I *will* say: and the fire's up, so you shall not wait long wi' hungry bellies. Denulf—come out o' house, and care for the knight's horse, you letter-poking do-no-good! come out I say; and fling your dirty parchment in the ashes to help broil the salmon, for never any other good will either you or I get out of it."

Aroused by this summons, a pale and slender man, seemingly about five-and-twenty, issued from the door; and, with a low reverence to Ethelred and his companion, hasted to take charge of the horse. A small roll of parchment was in his hand when he first appeared; and this he carefully transferred to a wide pocket of his coat.

"So, my friend," said Ethelred to him, "you have been at your book, I perceive. Remember,—a little honey every day makes at length the

comb full. Take courage, and go on: your labour will soon become lighter to you: and who knows whether it may not at last turn out as profitable to you as your good dame holds it idle and useless,—and that, by my troth, will be no small matter."

Denulf again bowed respectfully, and led away the charger.

"A scholar of mine,"—said Ethelred to Edmund, as they entered the house,—"I found him to be a man capable of better things than his station in life promised; and, during the short time of my abode here, have taken some pains to instruct him. And excellent parts indeed hath he; and more book-learning already, small as it is, than many of the nobility of this realm,—more the pity! But be seated, Sir Edmund, and let me bid you welcome to my humble abode,—so far as, in the absence of our hostess, I may venture to call it mine. Glad should I be if I could as easily reinstate you in the more splendid home which you have lost: and, humble as I now seem, be it told to you that I am not wholly unknown to the worthy thegn,—

though many years, of a truth, have now passed since we met."

"He is a good and noble man!" said Edmund. "He has been my protector and father; and, howsoever he may now be turned from me, ever while I live must I honour and love him. Basely—basely has his generous heart been put upon against me."

"Speak to me openly," said Ethelred, "tell me all that hath chanced to sunder you. Powerless am I now, it is true, but the day may come when my voice haply shall be not unheeded by the worthy thane; and this discourse may then work to your good. If in aught you have been wrong, conceal it not from me: man is a creature of many infirmities; and to sin is almost a condition of his existence. Of all the countless myriads that have lived, two only have so spent a blameless life as to be deemed worthy of heaven without first passing through the dolorous gates of death. Speak then as to a bosom friend, a brother, or a father; for the sin which is truly confessed by man to man is partly interceded for with God."

While he spoke thus, he laid aside the clumsy peasant's cloak, and uncouth cap, which had so much disguised him, and Edmund could not avoid remarking, as the last rays of the sun streamed upon him, the singular fineness of his head and features, and the striking dignity of their expression. His eyes were of a bluish grey,—mild, full, and lustrous: his hair was of a rich auburn, parted on the high forehead, and flowing in curls behind, and on either side. His beard was of a colour somewhat darker than his hair, short, and curling; his neck was strong, lofty, and commanding. Edmund had never beheld so noble a countenance; and, with increasing respect, replied,

"Of a truth, Sir Ethelred, my heart does not tell me that, in this matter, I can charge myself with sin: freely else would I acknowledge it to one who would, I am sure, mercifully judge me. In one other instance, much indeed do I fear that I *have* erred,—but upon that I am not free to speak with any man,—since it concerns one far dearer to me than my own life."

"Ha!"—ejaculated Ethelred, with a calm,

yet piercing look, that seemed to imply a suspicion of Edmund, and yet a belief that he could not deserve it,—" hast thou then—but no—go on, my young friend: let me hear thy story."

Edmund did not quite understand the meaning of this sudden exclamation; and, after looking awhile in doubtful silence upon the speaker, proceeded to detail the circumstances which had caused his dismissal from Cothelstone. As he went on with perfect openness, and a look of simplicity and truth, the countenance of Ethelred beamed upon him with increasing benignity. An expression like doubt sometimes clouded it, —but again it passed away, and the sunshine glowed more brightly than before. The cause of that first quarrel, however, which terminated in the fall of Oswulf, and the fracture of his arm, Edmund strove in vain to conceal: the keen intellect of his listener saw through the darkness in which he would have veiled it, and the truth was ultimately brought to light.

" Enough, my young friend!" said Ethelred, as the story was concluded. " Rigidly as I have examined all, I can lay to you no blame. Be of

good cheer. Leofric will some day hearken to me,—and your good name shall not stand blackened to the eyes of men. But you sought the protection of Ethelbert, to whom, as a soldier of no common qualities, you must, in this season of danger, have been a welcome guest: and yet from him also have you taken sudden and strange departure. That the Earl is arrogant and overbearing, I well know, and well can I believe that, to a spirit proud as your own—nay tell me not—proud thou art, my young friend—but 'tis a pride that becomes and honours thee—well can I believe, I say, that, to a spirit like thine, his domineering temper may have been a burthen too great to endure—and that, without fault of thine therefore, his face may have been set against thee; but tell me then——"

"Of this ask me no more," replied Edmund, —"with me rests wholly the blame—let that suffice—I can explain to you no farther."

There was here a pause. Edmund cast down his eyes, indulging in bitter reflections upon his separation from Elfrida,—and Ethelred sat gazing intently upon him, and striving to interpret

the expression of his countenance. He was at length about to speak when, with an air of great bustle and importance, the good housewife entered, and placed upon a rough oaken table before them the smoking salmon, and a basket of wheaten bread. Of this Ethelred invited herself and her husband to partake with them: and the good dame, with a low courtesy to the stranger knight, soon took her place at the table beside her quiet spouse; and, with the assistance of a savoury eel-pie, which she immediately brought forth,—a large cup of stout ale, that went its circuit to all, but was drunk freely by the dame alone, and, sparingly, by her husband,—and finally a dish of delicious curds by way of dessert, contrived to make for all a substantial and relishing supper. Ethelred himself prefaced and concluded the meal by a short, but humble address to the Giver of all things: and there was in his manner a solemnity such as, even at a modern mansion-house dinner, might perhaps have power to suspend for a moment the joke of a hungry alderman. The wood fire was replenished on the ample hearth, and soon roared up the wide chim-

ney, and cast its cheerful flashings through the room. The good dame retained her easy wicker chair for some time after the meal was ended: and, by the help of the foaming ale, her own brewage, and a cup of mead, also her own, which she now and then condescended to partake of with Edmund, who pledged her health in it, speedily lost her first bashfulness in the presence of so grand a knight, as she called him, and with many a jest, and many a boisterous laugh, animated the spirits of all.

"Ay, ay, dame Swetha," said Ethelred to her with a smile, "your face looks sweeter now than at that time you wot of, when ———"

"Now I'll hear no more about that, Sir Iddlerid," exclaimed she, clapping her broad palm unceremoniously upon his mouth,—"I'll not hear no more about it,—and so I've told you. Marry it was enough to turn the patience of Jove himself—him that you told us of out o' scripter—thof I can't say that Father Winivid ever heard of him afore—and he doesn't believe its in scripter—and who should know of it but him, if so be that there it is,—him that has nowt else to do

but to larn us all about that there. But, for the matter o' that, sartin 'tis that my Denny can spell book as well and better than him. Cans't thee not Den? eh? plague of thy pale face that's softer and whiter than my curds—why doesn't speak for thyself? But howsomiver Sir Iddlerid, I'll not hear no more about that—and so now you know—but shame and scandal was it o' you to let the good white wheaten cakes burn as black as my Den's beard,—and many a good wife that I know of would ha' flung the three-legged stool at your head,—and that's worse I reckon, than scorched loaves, or tongue-handling that breaks never a bone. But howsomiver that's all dead and gone, and there let it rot,—and so here's waes hael to you, Sir Iddlerid, and to you, sir knight, with the good-natur'd face o'ye, for as much as ye loff and giggle at the good wife,—and to thee too Denny with the cream face o'thee, that looks as if thee'd see'd a bargust. And so now I sall wish ye all a good night, and a merry morrow to begin with, if so be they cursed Daanes don't cut all our throats, and the hogs' too, afore sun's up."

Having finished her speech, which was heard by her husband with an inward trembling, and by her guests with smiles, the jolly dame rose from her creaking chair, and left the room, after first pushing out Denulf, whom, as they went on, she was still heard to rate for his meekness of spirit.

"We are under authority, you perceive, Sir Edmund,"—said Ethelred, when the dame's voice was at length inaudible;—"Heaven grant that we may never be under one more terrible! Awful indeed is it when even the humble peasant cannot retire to his couch without thinking that, before morning, it may be a bloody death-bed to him!"

"Where is the king?"—exclaimed Edmund, with a warmth that had not before escaped him,—"Why does he slumber now?—wherefore does he not lift the banner—and proclaim war to the last man?"

Ethelred looked at him in astonishment for a while; then calmly addressed him.

"The king, my young friend, has doubtless many faults—and may in this matter have justly

deserved censure:—but I know not:—the hand of sickness, men say, hath been heavy upon him, even that death would have been a welcome relief: but the extreme agony hath passed away, and now indeed might he go with his soldiers to the field. But where are they? Where are the heartless nobles that sank before the first rush of the invader? The king is a mighty name, yet his strength is but that of one man. The king's power is that of his people: and, when his people are cast down, his might is withered. Know you not, Sir Edmund, that traitors swarm in the land?—that a price hath been set upon his head? that his strongest nobles have bent the knee to the Dane? If he should appear—who will stand at his side?"

"All," replied Edmund. "Blamed as he has been, and reviled, by many, for his love of peace, and his devotion to learning, when he should have been in the field against his enemies, all would now leap up at his summons. The kingdom has felt the scourge, and the fetter, and longs to burst from its bondage. Let him appear, and devote himself to his country, for

good or for evil: Let him triumph, or die!—then will he at least have done his duty. And, if soon he gird not his loins to the task,"—he added, after a pause,—" verily will another be chosen in his stead. The work is already in hand; and ere long will the blow be struck."

" And, if a better than himself can be found," replied Ethelred, " well do I wish that the stroke were passed. But the hour, Sir Edmund, waxes late. You will abide yet one day more with me; and on the morrow will we farther discourse upon this. Let us now to our couch, and close the day with prayers for our country."

" One day more then," said Edmund, " I will tarry; for pleasant truly is the time that I pass in talk with you. Would that I might longer enjoy it!"

Ethelred pressed his hand, and smiled upon him. Each then apart put up his prayer: and afterwards retired together to share one couch.

Edmund lay long awake, musing alternately upon his changed fortunes, upon Elfrida, and the interesting stranger who slept beside him. A groan, as of suppressed pain, escaped now

and then from his companion ; but Edmund saw that he slept, and forebore therefore to question him. He himself sank at length into a heavy slumber ; and his dreams were of Elfrida, of Alfred, and of battle.

CHAPTER X.

The sun was up when Edmund awoke; and Ethelred had already left the chamber. After paying a visit to his horse, who welcomed him in the manner shewn by animals towards a master whom they love, Edmund repaired to the humble room in which he had taken his supper; and found Ethelred buried in a meditation so profound that the sound of his entrance excited no attention towards him. The usual morning salutation instantly, however, aroused him; and he started up, and cordially returned it. But his conversation and air soon became more solemn than they had been on the preceding evening. He took his meal almost in silence; and, soon afterwards, proposed to Edmund a walk by the bank of the river. To this the youth cheerfully consented; and—in obedience to the wish of his companion, who urged the measure as a caution to prevent

his appearance from exciting notice—laid aside his armour, and rich cloak, and dressed himself in a peasant's garb, with which the former supplied him. Having then provided themselves with angling rods, and a small store of food in their fishing-baskets, they bade good morrow to their hostess, and sallied forth.

The morning was bright, and fragrant of spring: young leaves were glancing to the sun, the tender grass was waving to the bland south-west, and the air thrilled with the glad music of birds on every tree, and larks whose voices seemed to come from the blue heaven.

"How deliciously this soft air breathes upon us!" said Edmund, after they had traversed the swamp, and entered upon the open ground; "How beautiful all these early flowers, and shooting blades, and light green buds! And the river yonder, how it burns and sparkles beneath the sun! Glorious indeed is the work of our Maker's hand, and worthy of all our praise and gratitude! Look around you, Sir Ethelred, and enjoy the morning. But your thoughts are melancholy, and you cannot rejoice in it. You are paler too

than yesterday:—is it the body's ailment, or a mind unquiet, that afflicts you? Come—you were last night my ghostly father,—be now to me the penitent,—and make confession of that which weighs upon you thus."

Ethelred turned upon him his full, bright eyes, and with a languid smile replied.

"You are younger than I, my friend,—your step is strong and light; and the healthful blood dances in your veins. Enjoy the happiness that is before you, and let not my gloom cast its shadow upon you. And yet,"—said he, after a pause,—"why should I counsel you to indulge in selfish gladness, and heed not the affliction of your brother man. Too easily is that bad lesson learned,—if of a truth it be not a part of our fallen and sinful nature; growing up in us, like a poisonous weed that we must labour long and hard to root away."

His speech was slow and solemn, and in the tone of one who gives utterance to thought, almost unconscious that his words are audible. His walk was slow; his eyes were cast upon the ground; and he paused at times, and leaned upon the rough angling rod, as if wholly lost in thought.

Edmund forebore to disturb him. He walked in silence at his side,—or waited patiently when he stood still,—gazing with increasing interest upon his noble, but melancholy, face. Ethelred made at length a long pause, as they stood by the river's bank, and appeared wholly unaware of the presence of his silent companion. His left hand rested upon the angling rod; and his eyes were upon the gently flowing stream, which, while he looked upon it, he evidently saw not. Edmund soon perceived that his companion was no keen sportsman. A huge salmon sprang high from the water within a few feet of him,—but, though the drops flew upon his face, he appeared not to see it. Neither limb nor feature stirred: his eye remained unclosed, and his lips slightly compressed. In a soft, deep, impassioned tone, he began at length, but with frequent intervals, and many a heavy sigh, to give shape to his thoughts.

"If indeed through fault of mine this evil hath fallen upon us———Oh God! give me light that I may see into the darkness of my heart!——Heavy, heavy hath been thy hand upon me!——

But too soon I sank——They forsook me—but I,—I ought to have stood——Merciful Father! hear the cries of thy children!—Let us not be burned before this fierce fire!—Give strength to our arms,—and wisdom to our counsels——Let our hearts be as the heart of one man!"

Edmund retired when his companion began to give audible vent to his meditations; for he felt that to remain and overhear the unconscious outpourings of an afflicted spirit would be dishonourable. Seating himself, therefore, upon the trunk of a fallen willow, that dipped its branches into the water a little farther up the stream, he awaited in silence the movements of his absorbed friend. His thoughts were soon with Elfrida: but, while occupied with his own griefs,—while lamenting the evil that, through him, had fallen upon that noble, generous, and beautiful creature,—he could not forbear casting at times a glance at his melancholy friend. Ethelred still remained in his first position, apparently ignorant of all around him. The trout were leaping up in every direction,—ever and anon, a salmon turned up his broad glistering

side,—but the angler stood like a statue; and the favourable hour was passing away. A friend less ceremonious than Edmund at length, however, disturbed him. With tongue lolling out, and ears sweeping the grass, a young spaniel came at full speed; and, leaping with a joyful and incessant barking upon the silent fisherman, soon dispelled his reverie. Ethelred stooped and caressed the noisy intruder, who, speedily changing his sport, seized upon the long coarse cloak, behind; and, with delighted eyes, shaking head, and earnest growl, tugged and pulled in every direction. Edmund got up when he saw that his companion was fairly aroused; and advanced towards him.

"We are unprofitable labourers," said Ethelred, as he drew nigh, "but let us now make amends. Get thee away, thou foolish gamboler,—thy master calls thee; and I am not now in the mood for thy mad frolicks. Get thee gone, I say." While he spoke thus to the playful animal, he strove to free the cloak from his teeth: but the delighted dog, tugging and leaping to and fro, appeared in no humour to give

up his booty. A long, shrill whistle at last caught his ear: he paused,—looked around with eager eye,—and then darted away towards Denulf, who was just disappearing on the pathway of the morass.

"Man boasts himself the lord of creation,"—said Ethelred, as he watched the flight of the barking puppy,—"but how little does his power sometimes avail him! That dog perchance is happier than the king of Wessex!"

"He has fewer enemies, at least," replied Edmund, "and fewer cares. But I rejoice to see you in somewhat recovered spirits, Sir Ethelred: and I trust that the cloud will not again overshadow you."

"I have a malady, my friend," said Ethelred, "which sometimes grievously visits me; and seldom indeed leaves me wholly at ease: then are my thoughts dark, and my strength impaired. But you have found, I see, my favourite seat, where sometimes I read, and oftener sit in silent contemplation. Let us prepare our rods; and, after taking what will suffice for our evening meal, pass the time in discourse. But you

are, I see, unversed in the fisher's craft: and truly I am myself no master of it. There be those who, from morn to eve, can toil delighted at this work—but, for me, 'tis but the labour by which I must now earn a portion of my daily food. There—fix this kneaded bread upon your hook,—cast your line into the water, and presently our work will be done."

"I have often marvelled"—said Edmund, "at the eagerness with which some men pursue this, which appears to me both a tiresome and cruel employment."

"That to such men," responded Ethelred, "the employment is not tiresome, their eager pursuit of it maketh plain,—and, for its cruelty, that must depend mainly upon the method with which they practise it. My bait, you see, is merely this kneaded dough;—and the fish that I take, I release from pain by an instant death, perhaps less hard to suffer than the pangs of natural decay. A subtle question might indeed be raised as to the right of man to deprive of life the creatures which, equally with himself, are the work of God's hand. Yet even Christ

forbade not the fisher to cast his net;—and beast, we see, doth prey upon beast, by instinct of its nature. Strange and wonderful doth appear this dispensation of the All Merciful! but the mystery is too deep for the short line of human reason to fathom. Many a time and oft hath this matter come into my thoughts; and to my best judgment it seemeth that, while most evil surely it is to make our sport in aught which inflicteth pain or death upon the creatures of God's hand, yet lawful is it, and according with the intent of the Creator, that of such we should make our necessary food. But lay aside your rod, my friend, for truly you grasp it like one to whom it is a grievous burthen, and let us, after a while, discourse of other matters. For the present, we must employ ourselves each with his own thoughts, for even the wisest discourse hath no charms for fish, or for wary anglers."

"Right gladly!" said Edmund, laying down the rod, "and, if I have your permission, Sir Ethelred, fain would I employ myself,—and that more pleasantly, and profitably perhaps,—in look-

ing over this small book, which I have discovered in the pocket of your doublet."

"Ha!" said his companion, as Edmund drew it forth, "I had forgotten that it was left there; but, according to the fashion of this time, thou hast been too well bred, I fear me, to profit much from what thou wilt find there. There are no gilded margins, or pictures, to please thine eye, my friend,—and the good Leofric, I bethink me, is not a man likely to have been over-earnest in recommending to so gay a youth the painful study of letters. But open it, if thou wilt,—and glad should I be to think that thou couldst open it to thy profit."

Edmund obeyed; and, looking at the title upon the first page, eagerly exclaimed, "Ha! Boetius de Consolatione Philosophiæ!—A treasure indeed, Sir Ethelred! and an especial favourite with my first kind father and instructor. And you also are a reader of the noble Roman tongue?"

Ethelred had smiled, when he saw his young friend open the book, and watched the expression of his face, expecting to see him lay it down

with disappointment: but, when he beheld his pleased glance, and heard him instantly, and familiarly, pronounce the Latin title, his delight and surprise was unbounded. Dropping his rod into the river, he uttered a joyful exclamation. "My dear young friend!" cried he, grasping Edmund firmly by the hand, "why did I not sooner know this? And who then hath been your instructor? Where hath he been hidden? To the king would such a man,—would you yourself,—be gladly welcome."

"My instructor was brother Cynewulf," replied Edmund, "the kind monk who brought me from Croyland."

"Cynewulf?"—said Ethelred,—apparently recollecting the name,—"Cynewulf? Went he not with the young Alfred to Rome?"

"I have heard him often speak of it," replied the youth.

"And where then hath he been concealed? When so few worthy the name of scholar remain in this island, why hath he not been known unto the king? Much to his own profit might it

have been, and to Alfred great would have been the delight of his friendship."

"But *you* then, Sir Ethelred, who are also a scholar,—are not *you* known to the king?" said Edmund.

"I am,—I am," rejoined the other,—"and you too, my young friend, must be known to him,—and the good Cynewulf."

"Know you then,"—said Edmund,—"where now the king abides?"—There was a pause.—"Could you not venture to tell him of that which his country demands of him? Could you not arouse him from his fatal sleep?"

A change came over the face of Ethelred,—and he remained awhile silent.

"The abode of the king *is* known to me," at length he answered, "and my counsel hath *not* been unheard by him. Ere long, I doubt not that he will appear. May he find a willing people to stand at his side! And you, Sir Edmund, who have learned in the school of the proud and ignorant Ethelbert that the king of Wessex is but the weak slave to his love of peace and of learning,—despising for these the honour and

the strength of his country,—you too shall see, and better understand, the monarch whom you misjudge. His fault, I tell you,—and believe me, for not rashly do I speak,—his fault is rather an overjoy in the tumult and the glory of battle, than a love of cowardly ease and security. But lightly may those censure the performance, who know nothing of the difficulties and perils of the task."

A long conversation upon the political state of the country, and the conduct of Alfred, now ensued; and the result was a complete overthrow of the opinions which Ethelbert, and even Cynewulf, deceived like many others by the too general misapprehension of the illustrious monarch, had instilled into the mind of Edmund. With eager sincerity, he avowed his former error, and present conviction, and implored Ethelred to lose no time in exhorting the king to call together his nobles, and to lift the standard against his enemies.

"He waits but for the hour," said Ethelred, "when his nobles and his people, shall themselves cry out for the raising of the standard.

But hard even then will be the struggle: and,—if God hold not his hand over them to save,—dreadful will be their fall."

"But who then," said Edmund, "who are you, that share the secret counsels of the king, and burn thus for the cause of your country? Of but one noble have I heard whose character may fit your own. Sir Ethelred—you are the Earl of Berks,—deny it not to me. Yet how in this place and concealment? Why not yourself amid your people to stir them up for their country, and their slandered king, to you so well and truly known? Away—away to your post. Let me join your banner—let us stay the hand of the haughty Ethelbert, ere he set up the king of his own choice against the noble monarch whose spirit he cannot measure. Declare, Sir Ethelred,—are you not he whom I have named? Avow it, that I may place myself under your banner, and go with you, for life or for death, against this ferocious enemy."

"I deny not yet, Sir Edmund," replied his companion, "that I may be he whom you have named,—but neither do I affirm it. Perhaps,

however, before yon sun goes down, I may more openly speak. But the noon is passed by, and our task is not yet done; nor have we partaken of our mid-day meal. Let us eat, therefore, and slake our thirst from the stream; and afterwards we will discourse anew."

"Willingly," rejoined the youth, and they sat again together upon the trunk, from which, in the warmth of their converse, they had arisen to face the river's bank, and, taking from their baskets the simple viands, prepared to begin their repast.

"It is not," said Ethelred, solemnly, "for the daintiness of the food, or for respect of the hour, or the place,—or for vain ceremony,—that the devout man asketh from God a blessing upon the meal;—neither is it wholly because that, without His gift of needful nourishment, these frail bodies must speedily perish,—since not less needful to existence is every breath of our nostrils, nor less deserving of our incessant thanks, —but, because amid the pleasures, and the cares, the toils and distractions of life, which chain our thoughts every moment to earth, it is good for

us that, at certain appointed times, we should, by the force of that habit of our nature which too often, alas! rooteth us in evil, be instructed to lift our thoughts from the flesh to the spirit, —from earth unto God. To those occasions, therefore, which with every man must daily recur, the prayer and the thanksgiving have been more especially appointed: every day must man arise, and every night must he lie down; at the morning, and at the evening, then, let him think upon his God! Every day, also, must he satisfy hunger, and with every meal, therefore, whether it be in the palace or in the fields, let him implore the blessing, and offer up the thanks."

After he had spoken these words, he remained for a few moments in silence; and then, with the look and tone of one who humbly presumes to enter, as it were, into the more immediate presence of the Deity, he begged a blessing upon the food. Edmund's emotions were fully in accord with those of his companion; and he joined with simple piety the solemn "amen." An address to the Supreme Giver followed, as it had

preceded, the meal, and, soon afterwards, they resumed their discourse.

After a rather long conversation, in which Ethelred enquired much concerning Leofric, the Earl of Somerset, and many of the thanes and warriors with whom Edmund had formed acquaintance during their common sojourn in the Castle of Maximus, Ethelred proceeded with a changed tone and look to address his companion.

"The daughter of Ethelbert, you tell me, is named Elfrida?"

Edmund assented.

"You slept well last night," continued the questioner,—"but my slumber was brief. I arose in the night, and wrote divers letters,—of which more anon. You spake often in your dreams, Sir Edmund,—sometimes, as if you thought yourself in the hurly of battle,—sometimes of the king you spake." (Here Edmund's face grew pale.) "But once you murmured the name of Elfrida."—(Cheek, brow, and neck of the youth reddened as if under the sudden glow of a setting sun.) "Was the Elfrida of your

dreams, my young friend, the Elfrida of the castle?"

There was a short pause. "I cannot answer you," said Edmund at length, with a look of almost anger, "Was this generous of you, Sir Ethelred, to give your ear to the unconscious utterance of a sleeping man? I looked not for this in you! and I have no answer to such question."

"Be not angry with me,"—said Ethelred, taking the hand of the youth:—"be assured I was no cunning hunter after secrets. My own thoughts were earnestly fixed upon the work before me, but, in the dead silence of the night, your low speech struck on my ear more than a shout in the life of day. Spite of myself I heard; and your words disturbed me in my task, that at length I arose, and left the chamber. The name of the king, or the cry of battle, confused, and agitated me, yet I strove to smile at the emotion, and to pursue my labour;—there are no secrets in the young soldier's vision of battle, but when that other dream was upon you, then I arose that I might not know what you perhaps would wish unrevealed. But the name

had come to my ear, and I could not bid it depart. You have forgiven me, my young friend: and, if I now again put to you the question, think not that an idle seeking into the secrets of a youthful passion moves me. For your own happiness would I know that of which I ask: I am elder than you, and the ways of this world are better known to me. I would give to you the counsel of a friend, and a father, and haply I may some time give you the aid which even a father could not bestow."

He pressed the hand of the youth while he spoke; and looked upon his face with a serious and earnest benevolence, and paternal dignity, which instantly removed from the heart and the brow of Edmund all suspicion, and all displeasure.

"To me, Sir Ethelred," was the reply, "there is but one Elfrida! and, if I love her more than all the world beside, blame me not harshly: the barb was in my heart before I knew that the bow was bent;—and, if now drawn out, the life blood must follow it! Had I been forewarned, I might have kept from the danger. I

knew only that I gazed upon perfect beauty, and communed with a spirit loftier and purer than aught of earth: but I did not know that the bright star upon which I turned my raptured eyes was momently drawing me to itself, —I did not know how high I was uplifted to Heaven, till fate called upon me to return to earth."

"You speak with a lover's warmth," said Ethelred, looking upon Edmund with a smile, but not of derision, "and love, that expands and ennobles the heart, lifts also the words which are even as the breathings of that heart. To him that hath never felt this mysterious passion, the lover's language is but a madman's ecstacy: but I, my friend, know well how tame and weak the highest flight of words to reach the boundless expansion of the heart. And Elfrida,——gives she love for love?——or——"

"She does, she does!" cried Edmund: "But what am I to match with one whom kings might be honoured to wed! Our attachment was discovered,—I am driven forth a wanderer upon earth. But I do not all despair. That which my

birth has denied me, I may perhaps gain with my sword. Let me but return with renown from the field, and haply I may even yet find favour in the eyes of her proud father."

"Oh! how beautiful is this hope which the Divine Creator hath implanted, like an ever-flowing fountain of bright waters, within us!" said Ethelred with a kind of rapture. "Wants, pains, miseries, oppress us,—yet that heavenly light shineth ever before our eyes, inviting us onward to some happy place where we shall at last find rest and joy:—dangers and misfortunes to come, hang, like distant and horrid clouds, before our path,—but, even where the blackness is thickest, doth some cheering ray half pierce its depths, or gild its skirts with light of Heaven! Hope on, my brother. Hope is life. Far is the hope better than the possession: for in *this* the enjoyment too often perisheth in the moment,—but in *that* it is with every moment born anew. Oh! how admirable is this dispensation of our good Maker! And here, my young friend," he continued, after a brief pause,—"do we see the beauty and the excellence of that re-

ligion which placeth the object of our best hope beyond this earthly life. The hope of the good man can never perish while peril and pain and grief can torment him: though he might pass a thousand years of bitter trial, yet would the blessed light for ever shine before him, and strengthen him,—for his is the hope beyond the grave,—beyond the reach of ill,—and his the sole possession which will be indestructible;—which, being present bliss enjoyed, will be also everlasting hope of bliss to come."

Edmund was forcibly struck by the enthusiasm with which his companion spoke this; and looked with delight upon his noble face, which appeared to glow with the warmth of the kindled soul within. He felt almost ashamed when, by way of reply, he said,

"You would, I fear, Sir Ethelred, find not many to hold with you that the hope is better than the attainment."

"Few, very few!" replied Ethelred, "and you, my friend, are not perhaps of such. But that which is the opinion of the many is not *therefore* the truth. Man is every where beset with

error; and even that reason which was given to him as a guide, often leadeth him astray. But, look around on men, and turn thy thoughts within thy own breast. Hast thou ever beheld any man who, having attained the thing for which he had striven, sat him down in lasting enjoyment,—content with the good, and uncraving of aught beyond it! Doth the rich man say, 'I have enough,'—or doth the famous man say, 'my renown satisfieth me,'—or doth the wise man say, 'I covet not greater wisdom?'—Then, if so he have said, mark me, and see whether he be not feeble, or aged that he cannot toil for that which he would yet desire; if he be not palled with that which he hath, and unable to enjoy it; if life be not to him an endurance rather than a pleasure; if the years when he toiled and hoped, were not to him an existence more joyous than the years when he reposes, and hath nothing more to hope. But of this might volumes be written; and for weeks might we discourse without exhausting it. Turn, at fitting times, the matter in thy thoughts, my friend; examine thy own feelings; and

look at the world about thee: then wilt thou learn how precious a thing is hope to man; and how, with all beside that men call good, but without this, he would be but as living clay in a gaudy sepulchre."

He ceased; and for a time there was silence. Edmund's modesty led him to be an attentive listener to those who were elder or wiser than himself, rather than an active sharer in the discourse. At the present time, however, he was certainly making a very comfortable self-application of the injunction of his companion to "hope on," and had proceeded some way in the construction of certain very pretty air-castles, when his attention was recalled by his friend.

"The Lady Elfrida is comely, you say, Sir Edmund."

"Oh beautiful!" exclaimed the youth, pressing his palms unconsciously together.

Ethelred smiled; and, opening his doublet, drew forth a small picture, attached to a slender chain of gold, which he presented to Edmund. "Look on this," said he, "resembles she in aught these features?"

"This is also *very* beautiful!" exclaimed the youth, gazing with admiration,—"but it is another beauty;—and yet in something seems it like: no feature of the two bears semblance,—but in both is there a sweet, and stately loveliness that makes them seem akin. Oh! *very* beautiful!" said he, again, as his eyes brightened with increasing delight. "What artist hath so had skill to mimic life and mind! And who, if the question may be forgiven,——who then is the lady that, even reflected upon the dead matter, shews such life and beauty?"

"The artist is of Rome," replied Ethelred, "and some five years back visited this island: the lady you perchance may some time see,—she is my wife; and not less lovely than this her counterfeit."

"Happy man!" said Edmund, still looking upon the picture.

Ethelred smiled: "When I have been happy," said he, "she hath heightened my happiness,—when I have been in trouble, she hath lightened my suffering. Yet not that her face is fair, or her form lovely, but that her soul

hath that richer beauty of goodness and purity, without which the finest mortal body is but breathing clay. But, my young friend," continued he, with more playful expression of look and voice, " you hold advantage here: of one you have the picture in your hand,—the countenance of the other is vivid to your inward eye, —and well can you thus compare between them: —might you not, if so disposed, set aside these odds betwixt us? A chain like this, but richer far, methinks I saw last night upon the neck of him who shared my couch. Haply to it may hang somewhat that could much assist *my* judgment in comparing the beauty of that which I possess, and that which is thy hope——"

" Oh no!" replied Edmund, instantly opening his doublet, and removing the chain from his neck. " It is a gift which from infancy I have worn; and well do I remember the grief and boyish wrath that I felt when a Northman ruffian forced it from my neck, calling it a bauble, and a nurse's market-day present; but threatening at the same time to drown me instantly if I would not swear upon the cross to say nothing

of his taking it. I thought it then the gift of the kind monk Cynewulf; but have since learned from him that it was put round my neck by my mother, who died in my very infancy. The cross is, I believe, an amethyst, and, as I have heard, of singular beauty and cost."

While Edmund spoke thus, Ethelred held the chain in his hand, and looked upon it with the intentness, and abstractedness of one who beholds somewhat which excites in him suddenly an undefinable feeling darkly going back to times long past, and scenes wholly forgotten. He gazed upon the chain in silence,—involuntarily sighed—closed his eyes, and stood almost without drawing breath: again opened them, and looked fixedly—yet with an eye that seemed rather to seek inwardly for some lost image, than to scan minutely the substance before it.

Edmund beheld him with surprise, but would not disturb him by any question.

"Hath it ever chanced to you, my friend," said Ethelred at length, "that the sight of some object,—the smell of some flower, or leaf,—or some sound or voice of nature, hath stirred in

you an emotion which you are conscious, at some time or place, to have before felt,—yet which—so obscure and faint is it—you cannot at all connect with any one spot, person, thing, or time?"

"Very often," rejoined Edmund. "'Twas but a few days back that I plucked from a hedge a dark green plant which left upon my hand a smell that instantaneously awoke in me such an emotion. I seemed at once to breathe again, as it were, the breath of my infancy. For hours I strove vainly to solve the mystery; and concluded at last that it could be nothing more than a faint recollection of some feeling in a dream. But, on the next day, the sound of a childish pipe met my ears, and, to my surprise, the singular flavour of the plant seemed immediately to ascend my nostrils. I passed into the field where, beneath a hedge, sat a group of children, from whom the sound proceeded, and saw them with great glee blowing through slender green tubes. One of these I took in my hand,—it had the strong flavour which had so excited me, and when I also blew through the pipe, there

came instantly over me a vivid recollection that this had been one of the toys of my childhood."

"The instance is beautiful, and to the point," said Ethelred. "You will then understand me when I tell you that, what that odorous plant was to your nostril, this chain and cross are to my eye. I would not say that I have ever before seen them,—but yet they disturb me more than I can express." Again he was silent, standing with closed eyes, and lips slightly apart. "Your mother's name?"—at length he asked.

"I never heard it," said the youth, "nor can I remember that I ever inquired of it. The name *mother*, was, I suppose, enough for me; —I seemed to dwell upon that with an undefinable love; and perhaps thought not of any other."

Ethelred again mused for some time; and then, without speaking a word, returned the chain to Edmund; and, rising from the trunk of the willow, paced slowly to and fro upon the river's bank. Edmund, meantime, took up the small vellum-bound book, and employed himself with the lucubrations of Boetius. Ethel-

red at last, after a considerable time had elapsed, drew near; and the youth was beginning to question him concerning a passage which was, as he thought, erroneously translated into the Anglo-Saxon tongue, when the other, with an aspect such as he had not before worn, interrupted him.

"At another time, my young friend, I shall much rejoice to have your aid. The translation is my own work; and I cannot as yet boast myself deeply skilled in the Roman tongue. A singular advantage you have had in so able an instructor; and doubtless both your diligence and your parts have well seconded his labours. But now the day is wearing away, and something have I yet to do, in which you will I know take cheerfully a share."

Edmund rose instantly from his seat.

"I told you," continued Ethelred, "that during the night I had written letters: and of two of these I would desire that you should be the bearer. Rumours have for a few days held me in delay; but I will no longer pause. One letter you will to-morrow deliver with your own hand

to Bertulph, the Abbot of Glastonbury, and the other, also with your own hand, to the Queen Alswitha, who, with her children, has found refuge within the hallowed walls of the monastery. I am Alfred."

CHAPTER XI.

Edmund had beheld, and heard, with surprise the changed look and tone of his companion; and with growing astonishment followed him to the conclusion of his speech; but, after the last words were uttered, he stood motionless and silent,—pale and red alternately stealing upon his face,—and for a short time seemed confused, and ignorant what to say, or what to do. But confidence returned to him: gracefully removing the peasant's cap from his golden tressed head, and sinking upon one knee, he said, with a low yet fervid voice, gently bowing as he spake, "My king, accept my fealty."

"Thy knee unto thy God," said Alfred, raising him, and smiling, "and that homage I know thou art not slack to pay:—to thy king and friend, give the hand,—and sure I am thy love and duty will be given with it."

Edmund arose,—again bent his head, and kissed the hand of the king, which warmly grasped his own; then fixed his eyes with respectful modesty upon the face of his illustrious friend, and awaited his words.

"You will soon have the honour Sir Edmund, to draw the sword for your country. I need not exhort you to be brave, for I read in you that which may easily blaze into rash daring, but can never feel the chill of unmanly fear. In every danger, may the hand of God preserve you! You will do your duty to your country, and, if you live, you shall not be forgotten by her monarch. If the door of Leofric should remain closed against you, that of Alfred will ever be open to receive you."

Edmund with both hands fervently pressed that of the king; and his glowing countenance spoke the thanks which his tongue could not utter.

"You are young," resumed Alfred, "and for the present might perhaps wisely refrain from marriage,"—(Edmund's eyes were intently fixed upon the speaker,—and his cheek turned pale,) "but you are of a mind beyond your years; and

your piety gives assurance that the snares which too often entrap youth to their ruin will not make you to stumble from the good path."

(The face of the youth began again to brighten.) "The love of a virtuous woman elevates and purifies the heart, and I do not therefore exhort you to strive against that which draws you to the noble Elfrida. Still cherish it,—for sure am I that she deserves your best affection,"—("She does! she does!"—exclaimed the youth,) "and with it cherish hope. If Wessex recovers her power and freedom, the proud Earl will not disdain alliance with the man whom her king loves, and knows how to honour: and the voice of Alfred, be sure, shall not be wanting in your behalf."

Edmund sunk again upon his knee, and fervently pressed the hand of the king,—but could not speak.

"Haply that which I have now spoken," added Alfred, after a short pause, "you would gladly convey to the ear of Elfrida,—yet for a time withhold it from all. The haughty Earl must be watched, and, till I better know my strength

and his, I would not that aught of me should reach his ear. Up—up, my young friend, and put thy cap to its use. The grateful heart, which I know thou dost possess, is to me far more pleasant homage than the uncovered head, and the bended knee, which the vilest and the most false can as fairly show. Let us away."

Edmund arose; and the king took a step onward; then suddenly turned, and, with a smile, exclaimed, as he again moved toward the river, "But we are rare anglers, Sir Edmund,—Not content with going home without fish, we must even leave our rods and baskets behind us too."

Edmund sprang hastily forward to anticipate the purpose of the king by lifting the rods from the ground.

"Well, well!" said Alfred smiling,—"then be it so. You would, I know, cheerfully have done such courtesy to Ethelred, and therefore the king will not refuse it. But look"—taking up the book from the tree, "we were about to leave behind us a much greater treasure than our angling rods, though enriched by all the luckless fish that they have ever taken, or may

yet take. The loss of this I should indeed have regretted. And now we must hasten home, and meet as we can the rebuke which our jolly hostess will assuredly inflict upon two such thriftless anglers. No, no,—" he continued as he observed Edmund's purpose to be the bearer of the rods and the baskets,—" every soldier to his own baggage. Soundly rated indeed should I be for an unconscionable idler if dame Swetha were to find me returning, not only without our supper, but with all my useless implements upon the back of another."

Passing then his arm within that of Edmund, " So far, however, I will trouble you to be my supporter," he said, " and, as we walk on, will relate to you the little story which our good dame so promptly put a stop to last night."

" Bitterly will she be ashamed," said Edmund, " when she comes to learn the name of him whom she so familiarly treated."

" Oh—let that pass," replied Alfred, " very good is it for the great ones of the earth to learn at times how much they are upon a level with the humblest of mankind. True it is that

higher duties, and far wider field for thought, greater power, and greater responsibility, *ought* to lift the minds of monarchs above those of men who toil, or who think, for themselves only, or for some small circle of other men,—and such an elevation of mind attends, not unfrequently, I believe, the loftier station of nobles, and of monarchs,—but too apt are they to forget that this exaltation is the work of circumstances, and not a natural and inherent superiority to other men: and too much do they also forget that the greater mental strength which their station ought to impart to them, is often more than counterbalanced by the pride and self-opinion which their rank so easily begets, and by the greater weakness to which they are subject from the less restrained indulgence of passion, and of all the lower appetites of man's nature, to which they are lured by temptations more urgent than those which beset the path of humbler men. So much, indeed, do these evil tendencies underwork the vantage ground of their rank, that, of a truth, not among kings or nobles would I look for the highest human excellence, whether of

the mind or of the heart. Hard indeed is it to say among what class should such be sought after. The churchman, though with a mind commonly more cultivated than those of other orders, is too frequently ignorant of the world, and contracted in his sphere of thought, and bigotted to his peculiar dogmas, so that he sees upon the wide earth but the few who believe, and who worship, according to his own form: making of no account the endless millions who, with other rites, as sincerely, and perhaps as acceptably, worship the Great Father of all: such have I myself too often found, and striven with, when I would plead against them for the unbounded love and mercy of God to all the race of Adam; and this have they grievously censured in me as a sin for which justly might the Almighty Ruler take from me the crown and sceptre, and give them unto another. Not among churchmen, therefore, would I seek examples of the highest human excellence. The warrior is too often imperious and brutal, cunning, and ignorant of all beyond his own vocation: the thane, too frequently, but a sorry king of his own litt[le]

dominion,—debased by most of the vices of higher monarchs, and rarely uplifted to their acquired greatness: below him are the freemen, * whose thoughts are chained to their own petty cares and wants, and the miserable serfs whose bodies alone seem to live, while the reasoning mind, that should inhabit them, hath perished, or never come to life. But haply, in some future age, there may arise a class of men, who, not tempted like monarchs and nobles, not bigotted like the churchman, nor hardened like the soldier, not wrapt in petty and selfish cares like the freeman, nor bound to toil like the serf, —aided by temperance, and industry, the gathered knowledge of ages, calm meditation, and the unrestricted look which comprehends

* A freeman among our ancestors was not that dignified independent being, "lord of the lion heart and eagle eye," which our poets fancy under this appellation; he was rather an Anglo-Saxon not in the servile state; not properly attached to the land as the slaves were; he was freed from the oppression of arbitrary bondage; he was often a servant and a master, but he had the liberty to quit the service of one lord, and choose another. —*Turner*, Vol. iii. p. 100.

man, through all ages and countries —may, above every other class, furnish the models by which to judge of the eminence to which our nature may reach. But I forget our good hostess," he continued, in a gayer tone, "whose broad palm upon my mouth last night has given occasion for such unusual freedom of tongue to-day. And, in truth, this loquacity is a fault with me at times, when alone, and meditating aloud, or when in the company of a listener like yourself, Sir Edmund, whose modest attention gives me no hint that I am *not* alone. You must aid me to correct this, my young friend; and you will find, I trust, that a single word will generally suffice to rouse the waking dreamer."

"Your majesty too deeply honours me by making me partaker of your thoughts," replied Edmund, with unfeigned humility of look and tone,—"nor, save at your own express command, would I do aught that might deprive me of the happiness of profiting by your discourse."

The king paused and looked with attentive eye upon Edmund, as this first somewhat courtly speech escaped him. He was, however, satis-

fied of the sincerity of the speaker, and again moved on.

"I will not caution you, my young friend," said he, "against polluting your lips with the words of the flatterer: somewhat I will allow for the deference with which a young and modest youth must regard his king and elder,—this is at once grateful to the giver and to the receiver,—more than this you are too sincere and self-respecting to offer. And take note, Sir Edmund,—for the tongue of the flatterer will assail you, not less than the king,—nay, there is no wretch so mean to whom the sweetened poison may not be served up by some other wretch who needs his service or his good will,—take note, I say, that the soft music of the flatterer ever sounds from a hollow heart. Trust such man never! The sincere and generous will commend where merit calls, the hypocrite alone will flatter. But come,"—he continued, with a more cheerful tone,—"let us take our seats upon this stile before we advance too near the territory of the good queen who is about to be the subject of my story; for not willingly would I offend her dig-

nity, or put my own forbearance unnecessarily to the proof."

The two seeming peasants took then their places upon the broad rough stile,—each rested a hand upon his angling rod,—and Alfred, after a gentle laugh, prepared to begin his story.

"How strangely do mirth and sorrow mingle in this our life!" said he, after a moment's silence had succeeded the slight laugh which appeared about to usher in some humorous narration. "An hour of bitterness truly was it with me when the foolish event occurred of which I can never more think without merriment. But a merciful ordination is this of our Creator! Pain and affliction pass away, and are forgotten, —or, if they intrude upon our memory, we can bid them depart; but that which was pleasant, or mirthful, abides with us, and our fancy can again and again, for long years after, renew the delight, and communicate it to others. And, by the way,—how mysterious is this which we call the sense of the ludicrous, and how benignant is that law of our Maker, which, out of our follies and our absurdities, creates the means of in-

nocent enjoyment !—But again I am wandering from the good dame,—though probably, could she be referred to, she would forgive my inconstancy rather than my faithfulness to her in this matter. After the short and fatal battle at Chippenham, and the utter dispersion of the few Saxons who survived it——"

Alfred paused suddenly here, and his face expressed great agitation. He bent his head, and drew his hand to and fro, with a strong pressure, upon his forehead,—then again looked up ; —" I must not think upon this,"—he said : " Enough that I came here alone, and in this peasant's attire. Denulf received me with the kindness that feels for misfortune, and his good dame with the dignity of one who administers relief. You will perhaps smile, Sir Edmund, when I tell you that, in the hurry of exchanging my attire for this peasant's dress, I had wholly forgotten that which, in one sense, would so well have befriended me when all other friends were away,—I mean my purse : nor did I, till too late, discover the misfortune. I came here then without means of purchasing food ; and for

weeks lay in a state of bodily anguish, and mental wretchedness, which prevented my rising from the humble bed. The good dame, at this period, shewed to me every real kindness; and Denulf, in the intervals of his labours, was frequently by my couch, soothing and comforting me. In these hours it was that I discovered the goodness of his heart, and the native superiority of his uninstructed mind: and proposed to him to become his teacher. As I recovered, however, and was able to move about, and to take my seat at the fire, and join in the homely meal, it soon began to appear that, in return for all her charity to me, dame Swetha expected that I should perform such little labours as my unhappy ignorance about every useful employment would permit. It will for ever amuse me to recollect the high tone with which she would harangue upon the importance of her own occupations, and the insignificance of all such as I told her that I had been accustomed to. Yesterday, however, she appointed me to the important post of chief baker, during her absence in the dairy; and you will not marvel that I should have ill discharged the

duty. The conversation that preceded this was, however, so amusing that I must detail it to you."

After this preamble, the king proceeded to relate, with much humour, the scene which has been already presented to the reader; and it need not be said that he found in Edmund a delighted, yet respectful listener.

"But come," he pursued, with a cheerful tone, as he descended from the stile, "Let us begone, and propitiate as we can the anger of our sovereign, which will certainly alight upon two such profitless labourers."

At this moment a tramp of horse was heard, and six or seven mailed riders, whose armour flashed bright to the sun, were beheld rapidly approaching.

CHAPTER XII.

"BACK, Sir Edmund!" cried the king, hastily repassing the stile: "Let us watch them, as they come up, under skreen of the hedge. They may be enemies."

Edmund was in a moment beyond the gate; and at the side of the king. Both peered with enquiring looks through the apertures of the willow hedge.

"Do you make out their armour, Sir Edmund?" demanded the king.

"Saxon, I believe," replied the youth: "but the flashing of the sun forbids a steady gaze."

"Northmen, I fear them," rejoined the king after a short pause,—"but no—and yet—"

"Assuredly Saxon, my liege.—One of them carries a small banner, with the white horse. But may I stand in the road, and gain clearer view? I have no fear of being overtaken."

"No—no"—said the king,—"we shall have certainty anon. They talk aloud too,—and their accent will betoken them."

A short time brought the horsemen near enough to give assurance that they were Saxon; and Alfred, with his companion, crossed the stile, and waited their coming up.

"He upon the black horse is known to me," said the king,—"and a brave and honourable man is he.—What errand may bring him here?"

The horsemen were now close at hand: and the leader of them, the same whom Alfred had recognized, drew bridle. His example was followed by the rest: and the steeds, after a sudden halt, stood panting, and flinging the foam from their mouths.

"How far to Taunton, my friends?" said their chief, a tall and stately warrior, with a dignified expression of face,—"and what manner of road have you onward?"

"The distance," replied Alfred, to whom the question seemed more particularly addressed,—"is nine miles: the road in parts swampy and

broken. You would do better to have the morning before you for your ride."

"Our business is urgent," returned the horseman. "Is the way dangerous? say you,—or difficult merely?"

"The sun is going down," replied Alfred, "and you may find it worse than you would like. If I knew the nature of your business, I might perhaps tell you whether I thought it worth the peril—"

During this brief conversation the horseman eyed the seeming peasant with great intentness; and to the last words replied, after a moment's silence,—

"Your speech, my friend, suits not your garments: and your voice, methinks, hath met my ear before now. Your face, also, if I mistake not, is no stranger to me,—and yet I cannot point to time or place where I may have encountered you. Perhaps you may assist me. I am the Earl of Berks."

"Retire with me a little way, my Lord," said Alfred; "and I may perchance awake your recollections."

As he spoke, he moved onward; and the horseman, after an instant's pause, and with an air of surprise, followed him. The rest looked on with wonder, and for a time remained in total silence. They beheld their leader stop, and bend his head to catch the words which the seeming peasant was uttering in a tone so low as to be wholly inaudible where they stood. The face of the man was turned from the sun, but partly lighted by a reflection from some portion of the horseman's armour, so as to shew with distinctness its varying expression. They saw beneath the peasant's cap a noble and intellectual countenance, slightly upraised to the stooping rider. Its look was at first that of grave inquiry; and, while the lips moved, the full, bright eye glanced once toward the horsemen behind, and again were fixed upon the face of their leader, whose low voice was then heard in reply. A second time the peasant spoke: and, as he went on, the horseman started slightly, as if in displeasure; but instantly resumed his position, and was heard to answer. There was then a pause: the eyes of this singular person poured a steady beam upon

the face of the rider; and a smile of arch intelligence began slowly to steal over every feature. The look of the horseman was evidently bent with intense earnestness upon the peasant, although but a small portion of his face was visible to his companions. After another, but almost imperceptible, start, he began gradually to draw back, and at the same time to elevate his person, till he had regained nearly his full height; suddenly then he flung the reins on the neck of the steed,—drew his right foot hastily from the stirrup,—and was about to throw himself from the horse; when the lifted hand of the peasant, and the single word "no,"—distinctly heard by all, arrested his motion. Another private conversation then began betwixt them; and the horsemen, who had hitherto sat mute spectators, could no longer suppress their amazement. After turning upon each other looks of astonishment, every man began to whisper to his fellows. "Who can it be?" was the simultaneous demand of all.

"It must be the Earl of Wilts,"—said one, "he has not been heard of lately."

"No," said another, "he wants two inches of his height; and his features are not the same."

"Oddune, the Earl of Devon," whispered another.

"Tush man!" said a fourth, "this is the full head short,—and near a foot in shoulder width, —besides a difference of some score of years."

One voice now suggested that they should question Edmund, who stood near them with his eyes fixed upon Alfred and his companion.

"No, no," said another, "put no questions; whosoever the first may be, this is his equal, take my word upon it."

Several other guesses were made, but did not give satisfaction. One horseman at length, in a still deeper whisper, said "The king."

In a moment all were fixed and silent, with eyes eagerly bent upon the object of their curiosity.

The leader at last rode toward them, his dark and noble face glowing with mingled surprise and pleasure; while Alfred, beckoning Edmund toward him, and leaning upon his arm, began to take the way toward the morass. Enquiring looks were turned upon the Earl as he came up.

"I have just heard intelligence," said he to his followers, "which will delay our journey: and we shall therefore rest for the night at a house which our guide, who is before us, will point out. Ask no questions, my friends—but follow, and in silence."

When Alfred had reached the entrance of the path through the morass, he turned to the Earl, who was a short distance behind him: "You must alight here, my lord," he said; "and keep with care the middle of the path; for to either hand the swamp is deep and dangerous: and it may be well to interpose the space of a few yards betwixt each horse: the ground might yield beneath the weight of too close a line."

The Earl bowed; and repeated the caution to his companions; who in silence, but not without fear, led their shy steeds across the rolling morass. They passed in safety, and drew near to the house, from which issued suddenly a shrill scream of terror, while at the same instant the door was flung to, and hastily barricaded. The screaming continued, and was increased by another

female voice, while other doors were heard hastily slammed to and fastened.

"Our royal dame," said the king to Edmund, "mistakes us, on my life, for Northmen; and already fancies herself and hogs barbarously slaughtered. We must relieve her from this alarm as quickly as we can."

Making then a sign to the horsemen to remain still, he advanced to the door, and knocked gently with the butt end of his angling rod. There was now a dead silence: he waited awhile, —and again struck softly upon the door. Still no sound was heard. Retiring then a few steps backward, he looked up to a latticed window, and called upon the viewless dame.

"You need not be afraid, my good Swetha," he said; "there are none here but friends. Open the door, and be of good cheer."

There was still a short silence; and he was advancing to try the third knock, when a window slowly opened above. He heard the sound, and looked up.

"Be not alarmed Swetha," he said, with a smile to that personage, whose buxom face, pale

now as her own butter-milk, peered out of the window :—" These are all quiet friends of mine ; and will be obliged to you if you will open the door, and let us have some rest and refreshment."

" Rest and refreshmunt ?" exclaimed the woman—" Where, ith' name of all the saants, am I to get rest and refreshmunt for a hundred men, and more ? Friends ? say you ? Ay, ay—Sir Iddlerid,—friends o' your'n mayhap they be,—but they cannot be friends o' mine, I'm thinking, for I never see'd 'em afore. Ah ! you false loon ! I see how 'tis,—they be bloody Daanes, I see they be, by their grinning : but God's curse will be upon you, you false and hippercriticle loon you ! and upon every villin among you ! Do your will—do your will ! Kill us all ! kill us all ! and what not, as soon as you like, —but I'se niver open door to you, ill-looking varment that ye all are ! Den ! you doited dono-good ! What are you guaing to do ? Will ye help 'em murder us ?"

The concluding words of this speech were almost unheard : the dame hastily disappeared,—

and her hurried footsteps denoted pursuit of some person within. The door was, however, opened by Denulf before she could prevent it; and she came up only just in time to bestow upon him a sound cuff, and snatch up the thick bar of oak which he had removed from the staples, where it served, instead of bolts, to secure the entrance. Her look bespoke the delirium of rage and terror.

"I'll brain you, every villin among you!" she roared out, while she swung the oaken bar wildly round her head. "Dont'e come near me! Dont'e come near me! I'll be the death o' you all! I'll send you to your father Sathan, incarnid fieands that ye be!"

Alfred stood awhile at the entrance, smiling at her blind fury,—which he nevertheless thought likely to prove dangerous to any one who should too hastily confront it,—and vainly endeavouring, amid the tempest of her vociferation, to make himself heard by her. Her husband behind as unsuccessfully cried out to her, telling her she ought to be ashamed of herself, as he was heartily ashamed for her. Nothing could

appease the terrified and yet desperate dame. A loud chorus of laughter, which they could no longer suppress, burst at length from the horsemen; and her fury seemed, if possible, to be doubly excited. This ridiculous scene might have lasted some time longer, probably till the strength and fury of Swetha had exhausted themselves, since the king, at once pitying and smiling at her, showed no disposition to enforce her to quiet: but Edmund, whose gentle laughter had been changed to indignation at this continued outrage upon the monarch, found himself at length unable to endure more. Walking hastily forward, with a stern look, he raised his hand to the uplifted bar, just in the moment when it was about to descend upon him; and, with a tone that seemed at once to overawe, and shame her, bade her forbear.

"We are no enemies, good woman: and you know not in what presence you act your folly. Retire within, and collect yourself."

The tone, the look, and the words, seemed to act like a spell upon poor Swetha. Probably the strange manner in which her formidable

club was suddenly held immoveable in her hand might also have its influence. She sunk, however, into an instant calm; and, after a momentary stare, like that of one who has received a stunning blow, turned round and disappeared.

"You have been hasty, my young friend,"—said the king, laying his hand upon the shoulder of Edmund, and speaking in a tone of gentle reproof; "when I forebore, it might have been well that you also should have refrained. I speak this"—he added with a smile,—"not in anger that you have vanquished the giant, whom I declined to combat, but as a caution to you against the indulgence of an impetuous temper which may involve you in difficulties that, under a better self-government, you might avoid. For the kind feeling towards myself which prompted this, I thank you,—but let not the caution be forgotten."

He pressed the hand of Edmund as he concluded,—then turned and motioned to the horsemen to enter.

Edmund made no immediate reply: his brow was, at the first, somewhat darkened, like that of

one who thinks a good intention has been ungraciously received: but the wisdom and kindness of the counsel were soon manifest to him: and he briefly expressed thanks, and a hope that he should remember the warning to his profit.

The horsemen, who had left their steeds to the care of Denulf, now followed the king to the room which had witnessed his discomfiture at the celebrated attack of the burned loaves; and, uncovering their heads, after the example of their chief, stood in silent expectation of what was to ensue. After looking round upon all, Alfred briefly addressed them.

"I see before me," he said, "brave men, devoted to their country: and the hour is at hand when their utmost devotion may be put to the proof. The king, my friends, has been oppressed with sickness: and his enemies have said that he has abandoned his people. But he lives,—and is strong in hope that, even in this latter hour, the hand of God will be outstretched to save. His nobles deserted him in the hour of peril,—and his own hand was strengthless,—but his heart was ever with his people. I need not

say to you, my friends, that, if the king should appear, and attempt a struggle against the formidable enemy that hath oppressed the land, he must, under God, trust for success to the prudence and the secresy of his measures,—that a force must be in arms before the enemy can have tidings of their rising. Neither need I tell you that among the Saxons themselves are men from whom the abode, nay the very existence, of the monarch must be concealed. But to you, the companions and friends of this true and noble Saxon," taking the hand of the Earl, "he will unfold himself; and in you will he find men worthy of his trust. It is the king who speaks to you."

The knees of all were immediately bent to their sovereign; and their names were made known to him. They were chiefly wealthy landed proprietors of Berkshire, who, stimulated by the patriotic enthusiasm of the Earl, had accompanied him in an expedition to the western counties, for the purpose of exciting the nobles to a combined resistance to the Northmen. Their names, however, are unimportant to our story,

which must presently return to pursue the fortunes of our humble hero. He was now, with expressions of distinguished esteem, presented by the king to the rest: and, by the Earl in particular, was greeted with an air of singular cordiality. The voice and look of this nobleman had from the first arrested his attention in an unusual degree; and the name by which the king designated him was the same with one which he had from boyish days remembered with love. His thoughts were, however, quickly diverted to other matters by the mutual inquiries which passed among those around him: and the important topics which were discussed to a late hour, and upon which the king not unfrequently invited his opinions, soon excluded from his mind all inferior considerations.

This protracted conference,—the low tones in which it was carried on,—and the air of mystery which hung over her guests, strongly excited the curiosity of dame Swetha. A thick and heavy piece of gold which the Earl had slipped into the hand of Denulf, as he resigned his horse to his care, and which that meek person had quickly

transferred to the custody of his spouse, had much improved her opinion of the new comers; and the supper which she caused to be placed before them by Denulf and her red-cheeked maiden, —for poor Swetha durst not exhibit her own countenance among them so soon after her desperate defence of the castle, and her inglorious surrender at last—was upon a scale of liberality proportioned, as she thought, to the amplitude of the gift. But, though prevented by shame from appearing in the presence of her guests, her conscience offered no objection to the employment of any innocent means by which she might quietly satisfy her curiosity about them; and her ear was, accordingly, applied with breathless, and open-mouthed, earnestness to the door; and her eye to every crevice in it. But alas! all was in vain. The wood was oak, and of massive thickness. There came to her ear a low and continued hum,—but no intelligible word: to her eye nothing but a quivering reflection from the fire upon the armour which lay in a corner upon the floor. Much did she marvel,—shrewdly did she guess,—but nothing could she make out:

and when, after having watched them retiring in their leathern doublets, and with their ample cloaks thrown over their arms, to the couches of clean straw that had been hastily prepared for their repose in another apartment, many and profound were the conjectures that she poured into the ear of her equally marvelling husband.

Early on the morrow there was again a secret consulting among them; and, immediately after the meal, all save her first guest, departed. But an intimation was given that some of them,—and perhaps attended by new visitors,—might return with the evening: her husband furthermore had been directed to procure certain articles of comfort for the sleeping apartments, and, though the execution of this order had been rendered easy by means of a heavy purse upon which he might draw without restriction, yet there was in all this a kind of invasion upon her little kingdom that did not quite please the dame. Her husband had led the horses one by one across the morass; and from him she learned that they were about to travel each in a different direction from the rest. Swetha was con-

founded, and could guess no more than the black-nosed bull-calf what it would all end in. But Sir Iddlerid, she thought to herself, was left behind, and she was determined to try if she could not get something out of *him*. Entering boldly therefore into the apartment where he sat busily occupied in writing, she proceeded at once to develope her sentiments.

"I say, Sir Iddlerid,—what, i' the name o' the blessed saants and martyrs! doth all this mean?"

The hand of her guest ceased for a moment to move, his head slightly turned towards her, and his eyes fixed upon her face. She expected a reply,—but he made none; and almost immediately pursued his labour, as though unconscious of the august personage before him.

"Gadzooks! Sir Iddlerid," exclaimed the incensed dame, slapping her hand upon the table with a force that made every fibre of it tremble, and the pen of the scribe start from his fingers, —"is this'n the way you sarve me,—me that's bin a mother to you, and more, thof may be you ha' more years o' your head nor I ——"

There was a momentary sternness on the countenance of her guest, such as Swetha had never before seen, and which caused her voice to sink rapidly from its first loud angry pitch to something like the tone of timid upbraiding. The frown, however, disappeared like the shadow of a passing cloud; and, in a grave, but mild tone, he demanded what she wanted with him.

"Want wi' you?" cried she,—"what is't you all want wi' me?—that's the thing as I want to know. Here comes you furst, crawling just for all the world like a dog a looking for some ditch to die in: well—I takes you in,—and gets you about,—and asks nowt but thanks for my pains:—well—in comes you the day afore yisterday wi' a man and horse,—asks supper and bed for'n—and what not,—but howsomiver I says nowt again he;—thof he did uphold th' arm o' me when I were like beside mysel.—Well—out you goes togither wi' your hanglin rods ——"

"And a strange dish of fish we brought back

with us, you would say, Swetha:" replied her guest with a smile.

"My sarty," cried she, "I'm thinking so: and here's more o' you coming, as I hear tell,—and here's bed gear, and what not, a fetching. 'Troth—th' next thing I reckon will be just to take the house into your own hands, and tell I and Den go about our own business.

"Well, my kind nurse and hostess," replied the king, "we have made very bold with you, of a truth, but, both for the past and for the future, you shall be rewarded to your heart's content; of that be sure. How much farther we may trespass upon you, I cannot now say: but, on the return of my friends to night, I may be able to speak with greater certainty. For the present, I have a labour of some importance before me; and you will therefore, I hope, permit me to remain undisturbed."

"*You* a labour o' importance, Sir Iddlerid!" cried she with a tone of scornful superiority. "Lord love 'e! what! wi' that scratting thing i' your fingers! And what's the odds, I should like to know, whe'r the sheepskin be

white, or scratted ower wi' they nonsense black scrats, that a chiel could do just as well,—or th' ould cat either, if her clawn were patted into th' black wash there. I know o' but one labour o' any importance that ha' bin i' th' hands o' thee sin thee came to this place, and a queer labour thee mad'st o' that, I trow. But howsomiver, if ye ha'nt nowt o' importance, as ye call't, to do, I ha',—and that's kneading the dough for a new baking:—but I'st be my own baker, this time, I promise thee."

She left the room; and the royal penman resumed his task.

CHAPTER XIII.

Edmund, meantime, on his gallant gray steed, was rapidly advancing toward the magnificent monastery of Glastonbury, in which the queen had found refuge. No longer the scorned and suspected outcast, but the confidant and friend of his noble monarch, the chosen messenger of glad tidings to the beautiful and sorrowing queen, he felt a sense of dignity and elevation of character which imparted to his look and manner its appropriate expression; and emboldened him to see in the future pictures of happiness and prosperity far more glowing, and less distant, than he had hitherto ventured even to glance at. His heart leaped within him as he thought of the moment when he might pour into the ear of his beloved Elfrida the tale of the past, and the bright hopes of the future. He looked forward to the day when, by the side of his applauding

king, he should rush like a tempest upon the ferocious enemies of his country, and of Christ. He heard in anticipation the shouts of victory: in the songs of the bards, and the acclamations of the rejoicing people, his own name was not forgotten, when they spake of the renowned in fight, and the breakers of the fetters. But, beyond this, and still more cheering to his fond heart, he heard the applauding voice of Elfrida; he beheld her eloquent face breathing love and hope that words could never express. His eye flashed, and his face glowed, as the present future stood before him. His own bounding spirit seemed to give impulse to his noble steed. The road vanished before them; and, while the morning was yet young, he alighted at the gate of the vast monastery. With admiration and awe he contemplated the solemn pile. The abbot received him with respect; and, with joy and surprise, perused the letter which told him that the king lived, and was again about to lift up the standard of his country. Without delay, he was ushered to the presence of the queen. The beautiful countenance that he had already beheld so

sweetly counterfeiting life, now beamed upon him with tenfold lustre and grace: the soft voice spake in music. He bent his knee;—he presented the missive of love and joy. The character was known. The fair hand trembled,—the colour fled from the cheek,—the bright eyes burned as they ran over the soul-speaking words. The hands then were clasped,—the face uplifted —the thanks to Heaven poured forth. The honoured messenger was greeted as a welcome and beloved friend: the eager question was put, and answered: the response of love was imprinted upon the perfumed vellum. Bearing the letters of the queen and of the abbot, together with a small box of treasure which was carefully secured upon the saddle, Edmund again set forth; and, while the sun was yet above the horizon, returned to his expecting and anxious master.

"Is she in health?"—were the first words of Alfred, as he eagerly advanced toward the youth.

The reply was in the affirmative.

"I thank thee oh my God!" said the delighted husband; and, impressing first a kiss upon it,

as he turned aside, instantly opened, and with earnestness perused, the letter.

" She prays to join me in my retreat," said he to Edmund, as he again folded, and placed the writing in his bosom. " The love of woman is a beautiful, a holy thing! Her unsuspecting weakness in one moment first tempted man to his fall,—but her pure excellence hath for thousands of years strengthened him to lift his soul towards heaven! The wish of Alswitha shall be granted. Privation and danger, shared with me, would, I know, be to her a happier lot than all earthly splendour without me. Yet a little while must she wait."

He then perused the letter of the abbot; and examined the contents of the box of treasure: from which he transferred to the purse of Edmund a sum which that youth most reluctantly submitted to take.

" Forgive me, my young friend," he said, in opposition to such objections as Edmund dared to make, " You are my soldier now; and the soldier, as well as the labourer, is worthy of his hire. Have no fear. My resources will soon be

ample. Nay—if your proud spirit cannot stoop to the boon of even your king,—think yourself my purse-bearer, and account to me when it shall be demanded of you."

The Earl now entered, and with him two thanes to whom he had borne the letters of the monarch. Other of his companions soon after returned, each bringing with him one or more loyal persons well known to Alfred. All were, of course, received with kindness; and all offered to their sovereign vows of devotion, and predicted success to his arms.

While dame Swetha was toiling to provide the evening meal for so large an assembly, the king held with his friends a consultation upon the measures to be pursued; and finally determined—not to repair, as by some had been proposed, to the fortress of any noble, or to any city of strength, where his presence must soon have been known, and noised abroad,—but hastily to fortify, for himself and a small band of his nobles and thanes, the obscure but strong position in which he had already found refuge; and there quietly to await the time when a suf-

ficient strength could be provided for an unexpected and decisive blow upon the enemy. As the chief object in selecting this spot was to keep concealed the abode of the king, until circumstances should permit it to be known, the absolute secrecy of every individual was earnestly enjoined. Since, however, it would be almost impossible long to conceal from Denulf and his wife the rank of their chief guest, Alfred resolved within himself to confide at once the secret to them, and trust rather to their good faith than to their unsatisfied ignorance. This information he purposed to afford them at the earliest fitting opportunity: but it was not without a smile that he contemplated the surprise of poor Swetha, both at discovering the quality of her inmates, and at the verification of her morning's guess that "the next thing, as she reckoned, would just be to take the house into their own hands."

Assisted by her husband and the maiden, dame Swetha now, with a cheerful, but, at first, abashed countenance, placed upon the table an ample and welcome supper; and received with good

temper, though not without blushes, the occasional jokes which some of her guests passed upon the martial reception that she had given them on the preceding day. All were cheerful, and filled with hope. Alfred himself, after the solemn address of thanks with which he concluded the meal, entered into the prevailing feeling, and gave proof of a lightness of spirit that had long been a stranger to him. His beloved queen and children were in health, and would probably soon be restored to him; his friends surrounded him; and a firm trust in the speedy blessing of heaven upon his country animated his heart. In compliance with the wish of his guests, he invited dame Swetha to take her place at the table, and pledge them in a cup of her own stout ale; which, together with the delicious mead, now found palates willing to do it full justice. The invitation was blushingly accepted; and the portly dame quickly installed in the seat of honour at the right hand of the king. Many a health was given, and returned; and many a mirthful joke was passed. Warmed and emboldened by the generous liquor, and the

good humour of her guests, the dame soon began to feel herself quite at ease among them, and to repay, with greater heartiness, at least, and strength of lungs, if not with equal humour, the pleasantries that were passed upon her. She condescended even to admit that "she was at times a thought owerhot, and free o' tongue," and,—with occasional interruptions, accompanied not unfrequently by a hearty slap on the shoulder,—permitted Sir Iddlerid to recount the adventure of the burned loaves. The unbounded merriment of the guests, at the recital of this story, infected her to an equal degree; and she joined in the convulsive laughter against herself, till she was compelled to wipe away with her apron the tears that flowed down her cheeks, and the thick drops that started on her forehead.

The hearth was replenished with ample logs, and sent through the spacious apartment a bright glow like the red beam of evening. The cups were filled anew, and the cheerfulness of the guests was at its height.

"Well Swetha," said the king, as the dame

recovered from a long peal of laughter, and sat, with moist eye and ruddy cheek, leaning backward in her chair, and fanning herself with her folded apron,—" We are all very happy together, I am sure: but how long now will you permit us to be your guests?"

" Troth I can't say nowt about it, Sir Iddlerid," she replied: " This gear mow not hold togither long wi' me. My sides ache wi' laughter worse nor if I'd stood at th' wash-tub from day-peep to sun-down. But laughing i' this'ns wont take butter to th' market: and you've other fish to catch too, I reckon, some o' you, than to crack jokes wi' the neatherd's wife till ye be all fit to burs'n. But ye'll break your fast wi' us i' th' morn?"

" So far assuredly we shall make bold with you," returned the king. " But you will not scant your indulgence to that, Swetha: we have taken special liking to this quiet spot of yours; and, if your recompense be ample, you will not forbid us to take up our abode with you for a few weeks, I trust."

" A few weeks?" ejaculated the surprised

dame,—" My sarty but thee'rt a queer chap, Sir Iddlerid ! And how dost thee think now that I could mind my own work, and take tent o' ye? And what'l become o' th' cheese, and butter, and eggs, and hogs, and what not, that'l ha' nobody to look a'ter 'em? Na-na—Sir Iddlerid, —that'l niver do: but ye're showing up your maxims again, I reckon, that ye may ha' a laugh at the fat wife. Take off your cup, man, like th' rest o' 'em: ye'll niver ha' no strenth if ye sit wishy-washy wi' cold water i' that'ns."

" But I must tell you Swetha," resumed Alfred, " that there is a talk of the king's coming here for a time: you will not refuse *him*, I am sure."

" Ha-ha-ha;" roared out Swetha, holding her sides,—" thee'rt coming it pretty thickish now, Sir Iddlerid. And the queen, I reckon'l come wi' him too—ha-ha—Oh ay ! to be sure I'll niver refuse he when he do ax me; and then Sir Iddlerid, I'll tell thee what,—thee shalt stay and be the king's chief baker—ha-ha-ha."

" Very well Swetha,"—replied Alfred,—" then you will remember your promise."

"Oh ay! to be sure I'st niver forget that, I'll awar'nt thee. Do thee bring the king i' thy hand, man, and I'll give he house room, niver fear."

"That is all I ask of you Swetha," rejoined he. "And now I must inform you that the king was here yesterday,—and that you saw him, and spoke to him—"

"Well done, my man!"—shouted the dame, giving at the same time a ringing stroke with the palm of her hand upon the table. "Well done! Thee dost it better and better. I didn't think it had bin in thee,—sich an a grave face as thee'st got o' thy shoulders. Now, if thee 'd'st had reasonable Christian liquor i' thy cup, I should know what to think o' thee. Ha-ha-ha—Come—thee dost it—get on wi' thee."

"You do not believe me Swetha," pursued he, "and yet I speak the truth. How will you then believe me when I tell you that king Alfred is now in this very room, and listening to your discourse?"

There was a momentary expression of doubt and fear upon the face of the dame, as she caught

these words; and her eye glanced timidly around the table. But it encountered there only the well known faces; and all animated with a broad smile that, in her opinion, could never pertain to the awful person of a monarch. She therefore recovered instantly her self-possession, and replied, after a hearty laugh,—

"That's it, my man! try thy hand again—Thee doesn't half do't yet. Why doesn't thee tell me at once thee'rt king Alfred thyself man? Ha-ha-ha-ha—that wud be summat like a queer un."

"Well then, Swetha," he replied, "I *do* tell you that I *am* the king,—and I claim from you the fulfilment of your promise."

"Ha-ha-ha—I thought as much,"—vociferated she, bestowing upon him at the same time a sound slap on the shoulder, "Thee'st got to't at last. Ha-ha-ha—thee look'st like a king, my sarty: and thee'st got thy crown i' thy pocket I reckon,—hast? Then here's waes hael to thee once more sir king Iddlerid, thof that's a queer naame for a king surelye—and a long reign to thee, and a happy! But I mow not go on i'

thisns,—for that ale's mortle strong,—and I ha' work to do i' th' morning. So the good night to ye all, my merry guests,—and the sooner ye're done wi' your cups, and got the beds under ye, why the better for ye I'm bold to think: and for thee too sir king Iddlerid, thof a merry fellow thee'st bin to night, that I *will* say for thee."

The mirth of Alfred was sincere, yet ever tempered by a dignity of look and manner which made his most unrestrained companion feel that, in his presence, any gross buffoonery, or vulgarity, was impossible. His humour was the playfulness of an elegant and philosophical mind, which, even in its moments of most complete abandonment, never ceased to observe, and to reflect. It was never affected; never formal and chilling; never looked like the proud stoop of a haughty superior condescending to those beneath him, and liable at any moment to soar again into disdain; it was the joyousness of a kind heart, and the pleasantry of a fine intellect, keen in detecting the little follies and absurdities of men, and delicately sensible to the exhaustless materials of the ludicrous. But the momentous cares and

duties which occupied his life would occasionally force themselves upon him, and fling over the most cordial smile a sudden shadow which awoke in those around him a recollection of graver thoughts. Such came now over his face, mingled with an expression of suppressed bodily pain, and his guests thought it respectful to withdraw for the night. To all then was the friendly hand extended; and each was by the other committed to the watchful care of heaven.

Edmund and the Earl were, however, detained by the king; and the hour of midnight had passed before they retired to repose. The probable designs of Ethelbert, Earl of Somerset, and the measures for arresting or defeating them, formed a chief matter of their discourse. The name of Father Cynewulf led to inquiries on the part of the Earl of Berks which terminated in a discovery, most joyful to both, that, in the Earl, whose voice and look had from the first strangely interested him, Edmund beheld his early protector and friend Theodric, and that, in the dignified and accomplished youth, Theodric met the Saxon boy whom he had found in the forest, and

toward whom his heart had so often yearned. A mutual embrace of the most cordial kind followed this recognition; and each briefly recounted to the other the subsequent course of his life. It was from Alfred, however, that Edmund learned much of Theodric which that noble-minded man would have suppressed. This we must sum up in a few words.

It may be remembered that our story left Theodric, with a small body of horse raised by himself, on his way to join Ethelwulph, the Earl of Berks, whose territory was threatened by the Northmen, and whose well known valour and patriotism gave assurance that he would not, without a desperate struggle, submit to them. The glowing enthusiasm and heroic devotedness of Theodric excited admiration and confidence in the mind of Ethelwulph, who assigned to his new friend a distinguished post in the army which he was then levying. The victory of Inglefield, which soon followed, was mainly owing to the bravery and decision of Theodric in a moment when defeat seemed certain. On the third day after this battle, their army was joined by that of the

king and his brother Alfred, to both of whom Theodric was, in terms of the highest praise, made known by the Earl. On the succeeding day the Northmen were attacked at Reading, and Theodric was again conspicuous for his bravery in a manner that drew forth the marked admiration and esteem of all; and not least of the king, and the young Alfred. This battle, after a brilliant success in the earlier part of the day, terminated in the retreat of the Saxons, and the death of the brave Ethelwulph, who fell by the side of Theodric, in the hottest of the fight, and covered with wounds. A more important command was now committed to Theodric. On the fourth day after the preceding contest occurred the celebrated battle of the Ash-tree Hill. The impetuous valour of Alfred, who commanded one-half the army, led him to the attack, while the king, fearful of the event, or indulging gloomy presentiments of approaching death, remained in his tent at prayer. It was in vain that those around him spoke of the danger of this delay. The overmatched force of Alfred was in the most imminent peril, yet

Ethelred declared he would not quit his tent until the priest had finished. Flinging aside obedience to his king, when loyalty to him would have been treason to his country, Theodric, who had under him a considerable force burning to engage, bade sound the trumpet of attack, and rushed with irresistible impetuosity upon the foe. The moment was most critical. The Saxons were overwhelmed by numbers, and already giving way. Alfred himself was in the thick of battle, and borne to the ground. The arm of a gigantic Northman was uplifted above him, and the battle-axe was in the instant of its descent, when the sword of Theodric fell, and the axe dropped idly from the severed limb. Alfred knew his preserver. The victory was snatched from the exulting enemy; and the retiring Saxons again rushed to the attack. All day the struggle lasted; and evening drew on. Theodric heard in the tumult the battle cry of Bacseg. His arm, which had before felt wearied, seemed now, at the voice and sight of the savage by whom his wife and children had been murdered, to possess suddenly the strength of ten

men. Springing forward from the ranks, he rushed upon the monster, and at the first blow sent him lifeless to the ground. But in an instant a host of weapons was upon him. He, in turn, fell covered with wounds; and the morning found him a scarcely breathing man among a heap of dead. To him had been in great part owing the decisive victory of that day; and his supposed death was mourned by Alfred, and even by the king whom he had disobeyed. Several months elapsed before his recovery: the king was then dead of a wound received in the battle at Morton in Berks; and Alfred rewarded his brave preserver by wealth and rank most richly merited.

Such is a brief outline of the narrative to which Edmund listened with anxious delight. His own less adventurous history was speedily told; and led to a request on the part of Alfred that he would, as far as he could recollect, detail the catastrophe of Croyland, and his own escape from the Northmen. These dreadful scenes had never been forgotten by Edmund; and, as he went on with his story, they seemed

to rise before him with a distinctness as vivid as though they had been but the events of yesterday. The character of Sidroc, so striking in its contrast to that of the ferocious barbarians with whom he was leagued, excited the admiration of the king: but the fierce brutality of Hubbo, who was known to be at that moment perpetrating in Wales scenes of similar horror, stirred in him an irrepressible indignation. Little, however, did either the listeners or the narrator know how soon that detested name would be heard by them with sensations of more fearful interest.

CHAPTER XIV.

The morning repast was over, the steeds were saddled, the friends of the king stood ready to set out in performance of their respective charges, and dame Swetha, who had at length been convinced that, in the late Sir Iddlerid, she must for the future know the king of Wessex, was upon her knees before the smiling monarch, and imploring with rueful countenance, and tears of real contrition, forgiveness for all her misdeeds, when intelligence arrived that threw upon the face of every thing a new and threatening look. One of the friends of Theodric who had set forth a short time before, returned at the utmost speed of his horse to report that messengers had just reached Burrough Bridge with tidings that a large Danish army, under the command of Hubbo, had landed in Devonshire, and invested the castle of Kenwith,

in which Oddune, the Earl of Devon, together with several thanes, and a body of about seven hundred men, had taken refuge. The messengers farther reported that the castle was unprovisioned, and must speedily surrender. This news threw a paleness upon the faces of most; and, even upon that of Alfred, cast a momentary dejection. Upon Edmund, however, whose detestation of the ferocious Hubbo had been strongly rekindled by the recital of the previous night, the intelligence had the effect of a blow upon a reposing lion. His sudden burst of fury was startling to all: but he speedily recollected himself, and awaited, though not without a blush for his momentary frenzy, the result of the consultation that immediately followed. The calm majesty of Alfred's mind, after the first overwhelming sensation had passed by, infused into the hearts of his followers his own pious resignation to the will of God, and firmness of resolve to oppose the threatening evil by all that human wisdom and constancy could accomplish.

But the measures by which this illustrious monarch ultimately delivered his country are matter

for graver history; and we must leave them to pursue the humbler theme of our story. Suffice it then to say, that Edmund, burning to signalize himself against the man whose atrocities had been for years the subject of his waking thoughts and his nightly dreams, requested, and obtained, from the king, permission to set forth instantly, and join the forces of Oddune, the Earl of Devon, or of any other noble who might have courage and patriotism sufficient to stand forth against the invader. After receiving then from the king friendly counsel for his own conduct, and certain instructions of a political nature, which need not be detailed, Edmund bade adieu to his beloved friend and monarch, to the generous protector of his boyish years, and to all whom he was about to leave behind him, and, about the hour of noon, set forth upon his journey.

A clear north-west wind, of several days continuance, had given firmness to the roads; and Edmund pushed forward at a pace as brisk as he thought justified by the state of his horse, and the length of the journey before him. In about one-third of the time, therefore, that he had oc-

cupied in his former ride, he reached Taunton; and, after stopping for a very brief space to learn from a group of persons in the market place the news which they were discussing, rode briskly through the northern gate. He had not proceeded far through the large suburb, then, and still, called the North Town, when he descried before him a crowd of people, whose hooting and obstreperous laughter indicated a state of mind very different from that of the grave personages whom he had just left. The reply to a question which he put to a bare-legged urchin, who was running with great glee to join the sport, informed him that the subject of their merriment was a drunken monk in the split stick. This mode of punishment among the Saxons probably gave rise to the modern pillory; and, with various modifications of severity, was made applicable to a large class of offences. It was practised in the following manner. A stout pole, or stick, having been driven into the earth, was then carefully split half-way down from the top, so as to admit within its cleft the body of a man, just below the shoulders. The two halves of

the split stick were then drawn together at the top, and secured by a leathern thong, in such a way as to hold the culprit firmly fixed. The pressure might be rendered gentle, or painful, according to the stiffness of the stick, and the degree of force used in drawing together the extremities of the fork. For lighter offences, the split stick was used merely as a means of holding up the transgressor to the laughter of the mob, much upon the principle of the modern stocks, and was attended by no bodily pain; but, for offences of a graver kind, the culprit was more tightly compressed, while he was furthermore exposed to the peltings of the rabble, and severely flogged with whips of three cords, each terminating in a large knot.

Edmund had no inclination to be a spectator of this exhibition, which, though matter of great fun for the mob, was certainly very disagreeable to the person chiefly concerned. The outcries of this unhappy man were distinctly audible amid the hootings and laughter of his persecutors; and the voice appeared not wholly unknown to Edmund, who, as he now rode indignantly through

the pitiless throng, could not help casting a look upon the sufferer. The back of the man was towards him as he advanced, and his dress, which was liberally ornamented with mud from a neighbouring ditch, appeared to be that of a mechanic. He was vociferating to be let out; and, by the shaking of his head, and the angry fling and stamp of his feet, appeared in high impatience of the constraint. Edmund felt indignant at the scoffings of the unfeeling rabble, and, in a haughty tone, called out to them to open, and let him pass, since they effectually stopped up the way. He avoided turning his head toward the man as he went by him, that he might be spared the pain of looking too closely upon suffering which he could not relieve. But a more distressing outcry, which that moment burst from the culprit, together with a louder peal of laughter from the mob, made him involuntarily glance backward; and, to his astonishment, he beheld in the degrading fork of the split stick the countenance of no other than the unfortunate brother Elf. Instantly wheeling round his horse, he rode up, and in an angry tone demanded for what offence

the man was thus punished, and by whose order. A hundred voices immediately roared out, that he was a drunken monk, and that they only meant to sober him before he went home, just for the good of his soul. A brutal fellow was at this moment holding close to the nose of poor Elf some putrid animal, from which, with closed eyes and shaking head, averted as far as he could, the poor man was endeavouring to free himself. The sputterings, and contortions of his face, appeared to furnish exquisite amusement to the bystanders, and especially to the fellow who was the most actively tormenting him ; but they were quickly moved to a different feeling. Unable to bear the sight of such indignity towards his poor harmless friend, Edmund called in a startling tone to the mob to clear the way, gave spur and rein to his horse at the same moment, forced a passage through them, and, lifting up the spear, which he carried in his right hand, let it fall upon the arm of the brutal persecutor with a force that made him instantly drop the carrion, and roar out with mingled pain and fury.

"Dog!" cried Edmund, with a voice that was heard above the uproar to the farthest extremity of the crowd, "You deserve that I should pin you to the earth. Cut the thong instantly, some of you, if you be men and not beasts, and set him free."

A loud and threatening shout from the multitude was the reply to this; and the fellow who had received the blow called upon them to "pull the villain from his horse, and stone him." Another stroke of the lance followed this exhortation, and prostrated the brute upon the ground. A second angry shout arose from the mob at sight of this; and several began to stoop for stones, and others to call for clubs. Mingling with their cries, came also those of poor Elf, who had now seen his protector, and implored to be delivered.

"Back with you, scum of the earth!" cried Edmund, with a vehemence that made the rabble shrink from him,—"away with you, or by Heaven! I'll make a red path through you!"

He stuck his lance into the earth as he spoke thus, and drew forth his sword. A sudden backward rush of the mob, accompanied by cries of

"murder!" was the consequence of this movement. Edmund seized the instant;—cut the thong that held together the fork of the split stick,—caught Elf by the arm,—flung him up behind the saddle,—seized his spear,—clapped spurs to his horse,—and was presently out of sight of the astounded rabble, and beyond the din of their mingled execration and laughter.

Their fury was, however, less justifiable than their merriment. No serious injury had befallen any one; and even the fellow who had been knocked down had nothing to show beyond a small protuberance upon a skull well accustomed to such, and a little discoloration upon an arm so stained with hues of filth as to render this new one rather ornamental than otherwise: but the appearance of the poor dirt-spattered, capless, and cloakless, little monk, clinging with both arms round the body of the tall warrior, whose kicking steed threatened every moment to fling him into the air, was a sight that might better call for the reiterated laughter with which they pursued his flight. It is probable that Edmund himself became sen-

sible of the ludicrous appearance which a pair of riders so ill matched must present: for, so soon as the sounds of the mob were no longer audible, he drew the rein, and told Elf to alight. This was a most agreeable order to the little monk, who hastily slode down at the side of the lofty and mettlesome steed, like a monkey alighting from a dromedary, and, after shaking his garments, and looking once behind him, set forward in silence by the side of his deliverer. Edmund also proceeded for a short distance in silence; for he felt a reluctance to inquire into the circumstances which had brought Elf into such a predicament, and could read in the expression of his face, as far as a tolerable coating of mud would permit it to appear, and in the unsteadiness of his gait, that the charge of the mob had not been absolutely a fabrication. After revolving the matter in his mind while they slowly accomplished nearly a mile, during which time,—a most marvellous taciturnity for at least one of the party,—neither of them spake a word, Edmund came to the conclusion that it would be better to make no inquiry at all, but

to pursue his journey as if nothing had happened, and allow the good brother to proceed toward the priory at his own time and discretion. Speaking then in a tone of indifference, he informed his companion that his journey was one of haste, and that he hoped therefore he should have his forgiveness for bidding him adieu. The unsteady-footed brother looked him in the face, and, for a few moments, remained silent: coughed slightly then,—hemmed twice or thrice,—and at length, in a disconsolate tone, began.

" Ay, ay! I see how 'tis—Christ be good to us! we mortal creatures that are made out of the dust of the earth, how we hold up our heads in judgment till our own turn comes to fall!—I did not think this of you, Sir Edmund.—But go on your way.—You think that my feet have been stumbling, and so you lift up yours to kick me into the ditch."

" I do not take your meaning my good brother," replied Edmund, " pray speak more to the purpose."

" Dont call me good brother," rejoined Elf, —" I am a brother no longer, either a good or a

bad.—But I'll speak to the purpose, as you say. —You go to the priory no doubt—the purse of coined gold hath never been opened.—You will find it in the ——"

"I seek to know nothing of it," said Edmund, interrupting him, "nor am I bound, as you suppose, to the priory. The gold is in safe keeping, I am sure,—there let it remain till I demand it of you. My present journey is far more distant, and the occasion peremptory."

"More need then that you should take it with you," rejoined Elf: "and, if you hear not where the treasure is bestowed, haply you may never see it more. Never again shall feet of mine pass the threshold of the holy place. A filthy and unclean servant am I,—and not fit for the sacred office that I have unworthily defiled."

"Why truly, my good brother," replied Edmund with a smile, "you may, in one sense, be called an unclean servant: and it might be as well that you should have the aid of a little purification before you return to the convent: your garments and skin are none of the sweet-

est; and I would advise you that your hinder person also is in a state that will demand much ablution."

"I talk not," replied Elf, "of such uncleanness as may be washed off by water,—but such as must be purified with tears of repentance: and atoned for by fasts, and vigils, and confinement. I scorn to tell you a lie, Sir Edmund; I have been strangely overtaken this day, and done things which would cause me to be confined for life in the walls of the convent, if the tale should come to the ears of prior Edelhun,—and come it will,—for I heard my name shouted aloud by the horrid crew from whose hands you delivered me,—and, before nightfall, the news of a drunken monk in the split stick will travel farther than Cothelstone: and if I go there to-night, never again shall I come out till I am carried out to a place where I can neither eat, nor drink, nor dance, nor sing, nor tumble, nor get into the split stick, to the harm of my soul, and the shame of the holy men of the priory."

"Well, but my dear good brother," said Edmund, "who will say that you are drunken? A

little unsteady your foot is, of a truth, and your eye somewhat ——"

"'Tis of no use to talk in this way,"—cried Elf interrupting him; "drunk I have been,—and not quite sober am I now. And I have flung my robes from me,—and have danced, and sung, and merry-made among the jolly youths and the laughing damsels,—I have essayed to run in a sack,—and contorted my visage through the collar of a horse,—I have striven to walk blindfold in a narrow path, having to either hand a filthy ditch, and I have grievously soiled my garments therein, to the mirth of all beholders: and lastly, I have been taken by a beastly rabble and put into the place of shame. And dost thou think, Sir Edmund, that, after this, I can shew my countenance unto the severe eyes of my brethren? dost thou not know assuredly that never again would they suffer such a disgrace to their holy brotherhood to pass beyond the wall of the convent? Dost thou not know that fasts, and flagellations, and solitary imprisonment, would be the reward of such misdeeds? And am I a man to live under such?

Come death rather, and release me from this flesh which so subdues my immortal spirit! No, Sir Edmund,—divers arts of utility are known unto me,—I can toil with the smith, or the carpenter, the weaver, the dyer, the glassmaker,—yea with the painter;—I will go forth into the world, and earn my bread by the sweat of my brow: nay I will go even as a soldier to battle against our enemies, and die ten deaths, rather than live hungered and imprisoned within convent walls! I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it!"

This was spoken with a rapidity and vehemence which indicated the highest irritability of impatience; and the pace of the speaker, in unison with his feelings, had quickened to such a degree that Edmund found it impossible, without putting his horse to a slow trot, to keep up with the walk of the little monk, whose legs, from the quickness of their motion, had somewhat of the appearance of wheel-spokes when not moving so rapidly as to be wholly viewless. Edmund could not forbear to smile at, though he sincerely pitied, the unhappy and over-sensitive little being. After prevailing upon him to

cleanse his person, as well as he could, at a stream by the road-side, he strongly urged him to return to the priory, and promised to accompany him, and intercede for him with the prior. But brother Elf was a desperate and resolved man: whither he should next go, he knew not, —but to the priory he would *not* go. Edmund determined, nevertheless, to see, and speak with, the prior for him; that, in case of his returning to the convent, his reception might be perhaps somewhat less angry than he had anticipated. Informing Elf then that he was bound towards Kenwith Castle in Devonshire, beleagured by the Northmen, but that, while his horse rested and fed at the village of Bishop's Lydeard, he should walk to the convent, and speak in his behalf with Prior Edelhun, he bade him adieu, and hasted forward.

The castle of Leofric soon began to shew itself as he advanced, and his heart yearned to behold the loved inmates. But the work before him would admit of no delay. Leaving his horse at the small alehouse of Bishop's Lydeard, he walked hastily to the priory; interceded, but

with small effect, for poor brother Elf, whom he believed to have been shamefully ensnared; penned a short letter to Ethelburga, in which he inclosed a longer for Elfrida, returned to the inn, mounted his horse, and set forth at a brisk pace for the house of the friend with whom he proposed to pass the night. He expected to find Elf awaiting at the inn his return from the priory; but the monk was not there; and Edmund hoped that he had repaired to the convent, and might meet with indulgent treatment.

A ride of fifteen miles brought him near to the house of his friend, about an hour after sunset: and, as this was a man of a jovial disposition, Edmund was not surprised to hear the sound of singing within, and, as he drew nigher, a confused hubbub of voices, apparently in earnest talk. Alighting from his horse, he knocked loudly at the gate; but was for a time unheard, or disregarded. Repeated knockings brought out at length a domestic, who, as he came toward him, repeated with great volubility of tongue the Paternoster; having ended

which, he knelt down, and bent his head to the ground. Arising after this, he demanded who was at the gate, and what his business. Edmund told his name, and wants, and the gate was instantly opened to him.

"You seem unusually devout to night Cenred," said Edmund, as he followed the man to the stable that he might himself look after his horse: "but what revelry have you here within?"

The man was just beginning a fresh Paternoster as this question was put to him, and appeared impatient of the interruption.

"Revelry!" said he, "Christ save you Sir Edmund! we are all performing penance for our master. The confessor has imposed upon him a month's fasting, and we have taken it off his hands, for you know he has small pleasure in such things himself. But, howsoever, we had a feast toward when this penance was pronounced; and, not liking to lose it, we agreed together to redeem the fasting, each man as he liked best, by saying the Paternoster, and singing the Beati Immaculati, or the Miserere, and

so forth, according to the law thereupon. * From day-break have we been at it; and there is not in the house a throat that is not as dry as March dust. For heaven's love hinder me no more than you can help. I have twenty Paters yet to go through. You will find Sir Ethelmund in the oak dining-hall. I will tell him as I pass that you are here."

This was uttered with haste, and followed instantly by a Paternoster, which Cenred repeated, as he walked away, with great zeal, if not with much devotion. Edmund was, of course,

* "A man may redeem one day's fasting by a penny, or by repeating two hundred Psalms. He may redeem a twelve month's fasting by thirty shillings, or may set a man free who is of that worth. And for one day's fast he may sing six times the Beati Immaculati, and six Paternosters; or for a day's fast he may kneel and bend sixty times to the earth, with a Paternoster; or he may bend all his limbs to God, and fifteen times sing 'Miserere mei Dominus,' and fifteen Paternosters."—Turner, Vol. iii. p. 542.

This law was not passed till the reign of Edgar,—but the custom probably was in force at a much earlier date.

no stranger to this singular law, though he had never before chanced to witness the performance of its regulations. His own piety was sincere; and the act of addressing the Deity in prayer or in song appeared to him ever to be the highest privilege, and the most solemn duty, in which man could engage. This mode of transferring to others the penance which surely ought to be borne by the transgressor himself, was revolting to his notions of propriety; and the irreverence of using a tiresome and heartless string of prayers as a penance was, he thought, a sin of as deep a dye as any for which it might be held an atonement. Unwilling to witness such mockery, he stood for a time in doubt whether he ought not to quit the place, and trust to Providence for directing him to some other house where he might find shelter: but his horse, wearied with two days of toil, and destined to a long journey on the day following, demanded food and repose. After carefully grooming the generous animal, he placed before him an ample supply of corn; and then threw himself upon a heap of fresh straw, with an intention to pass the night

there, rather than enter the house. But the voice of his host soon aroused him: and a hearty shake of the hand gave him welcome. Edmund stated sincerely his objection to go with him to the house, and was answered by a loud and jovial laugh, and an assurance that the day's work was over.

"Besides," added Ethelmund, "I must have some talk with you. Sir Sigifred passed yesterday on his way to Kenwith; and you go, I suppose on the same errand. But I can't talk now. So come along with you, man: supper is on the table, and I cannot tarry."

Seizing the arm of his guest as he finished these words, he drew him away with him, laughing heartily at his scruples, and vowing they would make a night on't.

His chief objection being thus removed, Edmund could not refuse to partake the hospitality of his host, who, as the night grew late, and his blood became heated with wine, vowed his determination to go along with Edmund in the morning, and die in defence of his country. The morning, however, found him, after a night

of hard drinking, much more disposed to sleep than to fight: and Edmund, no way surprised at this, sent to him thanks for his hospitality; and, before sunrise, was advanced several miles upon his way. It was his intention, if possible, to reach the neighbourhood of Kenwith that night; and he travelled therefore steadily on at a pace as rapid as he thought consistent with the length of the journey.

The sun was setting as he gained the brow of a hill from which he saw distinctly the beleagured castle, situated on a commanding eminence, and standing in solid blackness against the bright sky. On the plain beneath stood the tents of the Northmen, indicating a numerous force: the gleam of armour shot now and then from among them; and as he paused awhile in the solemn silence of evening, he caught the sounds of their barbaric music, and the loud shout that bade a taunting good night to the Saxon garrison in the devoted castle. Fired with indignation, he descended the hill, and eagerly pursued his way.

Darkness was gathering thick in heaven when

he reached a cottage which, as he judged, could not be very distant from the castle. He knocked at the door; and was, after a time, admitted. The peasant placed food before himself, and his wearied steed; and, after replying to his inquiries, agreed, in consideration of a reward which he deemed equivalent to the risk, to guide him by a secret path to the castle through the very heart of the hostile camp.

The bosom of Edmund glowed with a new, and proud, yet solemn feeling, as he found himself advancing toward the camp of the enemy. The night was so dark that it would have been almost impossible for him, without a guide, to have traced the scarcely perceptible path which they now trod in silence. There was no motion of air among the leaves,—no sound but the voice of the wolf, heard at times from a forest toward the south,—occasionally the hum and whisper of a gentle stream,—or the hooting of the wakeful owl. As they proceeded, however, other noises began to steal upon them, the faint peal of distant laughter, and the babble of numerous voices. This din became gradually more and more dis-

tinct; till at length, as they gained the top of a gentle declivity, it burst upon the ears of Edmund and his guide with an almost startling suddenness. The hostile camp lay immediately at their feet, distinctly lighted up by numerous watch-fires, and by the glare of torches that streamed from the doors of the tents. The revelry appeared to be at its height; and, as their road would be perilous even when the enemy had retired to rest, the attempt to pass it now would of course have been a mere madness. Placing himself therefore beside his guide upon the root of a broad oak, Edmund sat a silent and stern spectator of the scene. The air was without motion, warm and close, the sky appeared as if covered by one thick cloud; and all nature seemed in that dead hush which often precedes thunder. The height beyond, and to the right hand of the camp, on which stood the rude Saxon castle, lay in a deep gloom, its outline barely visible by the reflected light of the watch-fires. Occasionally, however, a passing torch, borne by some one within the battlement, cast a dim gleam upon the walls, like the faint touch of distant

lightning upon a cloud, and as quickly disappeared.

It was with the utmost impatience that Edmund waited till the din of rioting began to subside. The torches in the tents were mostly extinguished, and the voice of wassail had sunk to silence, though in one spacious, and apparently gorgeous, pavilion that stood near the centre of the camp, lights still blazed, and the din of obstreperous riot was heard. Over the greater part of the camp was diffused a dull red gleam from the almost expiring fires, which shewed nothing save groups of men who sat or lay immediately around them; while the extremities were lost in the surrounding darkness. Here and there a figure might be seen, walking with unsteady foot, till he disappeared within the opening of a tent, or perhaps sank upon the ground unable to proceed farther; and, at times, the abortive laugh of some sleepy drunkard might be heard, ending, ere well begun, with a heavy yawn. While Edmund sat looking upon the fast darkening scene, a broad blaze of lightning poured an instant's sunshine over earth and sky: the spacious valley,

hill and forest, camp and castle, blazed out; then sank into tenfold night. But that moment's glance shewed the camp strewed with sleeping men, with drinking cups, and armour, and all the signs of a deep and reckless debauchery. Edmund sat for a time anxiously waiting the thunder-burst which would, he feared, arouse the wassailers from their drunken torpor; but there was a long silence, followed only by a far distant and deep roll. A few broad, and widely scattered drops were heard to plash upon the leaves; then ceased,—and all again was grim silence and darkness. After waiting a little longer, Edmund arose and bade his guide lead on.

Without a word, they descended to the plain, and began to wind round the outskirts of the camp. All betokened the excess of intemperance, and heedless security. As far as they could perceive, no guards appeared to be stationed: the ground was thickly strewed with men overpowered by the heavy sleep of intoxication, the fires were burned down to the last feeble embers. Except from the one pavilion before-mentioned,

there was no sound heard, save the heavy breathing of the sleepers.

Edmund now demanded of his guide by what way he proposed to reach the castle.

" A little farther on," replied the man, " we shall come to a brook that winds along the valley, and, at one point, runs within an arrow shot of the castle. Do you see yonder small watch-fire, the farthest of all, and looking as if it were at the very foot of the castle itself?"

Edmund replied in the affirmative.

" There then," answered the peasant, " is the spot. A strong guard lies always there to prevent the garrison from coming down for water: and that, as I hear say, is the greatest grievance of all to the poor fellows that are mewed up there; for not a mouthful can they have, but what comes from the brook or the sky: and now these six days there has been no drop of rain, so that it's like enough they are sore beset by this time. But howsoever, up this brook, that we shall soon come to,—I could show it to you well enough now if we had but a thought more light—up this brook, I say, we

must go, for the matter of an hour's walking and wading,—but it is no where deeper now than mayhap a man's waist,—not so deep for you, who are somewhat of the tallest—though in the winter time, or after heavy rains, it runs deep enough, and strong enough to drown the biggest giant ever was :—well then,—after we have got up through the brook, that's well sheltered on both banks with thick bushes, and at this time o' night as dark as a grave,—so that small fear is there of our being seen, if we be not first heard, and that we must have care of,—after, I say, we have got up the bed of the brook to mayhap two spear-casts from the watch-fire yonder,—then we must climb cautiously up the bank, at a place I know well enough, daylight or dark,—and then comes the pinch of the business ; for the sentinels, as I told you, are never off that post, and thereabout, neither night nor day, to take care that the garrison shall not come down for water. But howsoever, I've passed them three times before this with those that wanted to get into the castle, to talk with Earl Oddune, I reckon,—or, be that as it will, there

they desired to go, and as I said, three times I've helped them to pass the guard there, as keen as they are on the outlook,—and I've no fear, if you'll be guided to do as they did, that we shall give them the go-bye once again."

"But," said Edmund, "this will be a long and troublesome passage; and, by your own account, not a very safe one. It appears now to me that we might, at as small risk, and with much more despatch, cross the camp at once through the very midst of the tents. There is scarcely light enough for one to be seen, and there does not appear to be a single man on guard: the whole camp looks more like the court of some alehouse, filled with drunken theowes, than like a station of soldiers in the neighbourhood of an enemy. Why then not cross the plain at once, instead of taking this long and troublesome path through the bed of the brook, where perhaps we may meet more peril from the few men on guard at the watchfire yonder, than from the whole rout of these drunkards."

"There now," returned the peasant, "there's what it is to have young, hot blood. Now Sir

Thane, or whatsoever you be,—what may the great odds come to whether you get into the castle yonder one hour sooner or later, if so be that you get there fairly and safely at last? but it will, I reckon, be no small odds to you whether you get there with a whole skin, or lie somewhere half-way perhaps, with a lance point in your bowels, or your head in one place and your shoulders in another."

"My reaching the castle an hour sooner or later," answered Edmund, "may be of great moment, both to myself and the garrison. Could Earl Oddune be made aware of the real state of the enemy's camp, an hour like this might be of more worth to them than a hill of gold. I am resolved, at all events, to attempt the passage; and will double the reward that I have given you if you will accompany me."

"Not if you double that ten times!" replied the peasant: "the breath of a man's nostrils is worth to him more than a world of gold, and precious stones: and it signifies little to a dead man whether he was yesterday the king of Wessex, or a ditch-sleeping beggar. If so headlong

you will be, Sir Thane, then here I give you the good night, that's all I can say,—and return your money which I can have no right to, seeing that I dont go shares in your danger."

" Keep it, my friend," said Edmund, " you have fulfilled your engagement, as far as I have permitted you, and are ready to complete it: you have then a full claim to the reward: and I will not take back one penny. Let me have your God speed you, and so good night."

" Now, for the love of Christ! Sir Thane," returned the peasant, moved at what he thought a high pitch of generosity, " be advised by me; and dont run on to your death. It was but last evening that some young noble or thane like yourself would have his own way, instead of listening to reason; and the upshot thereof was that he and his two followers, was pounced upon and carried off before they had got half way, when they might have been as safe as I was myself. Their horses stand now in my neighbour Cidd's stable; and there I reckon they be like to stand long enow, if they be to wait till their masters come to fetch 'em."

"Did they then attempt to cross the camp?" said Edmund.

"Christ save us! no;" returned the guide; "that would have been a fool's errand sure enough; for there was none of this wassailing then, and all the camp looked as sober and order-like as a congregation on Sunday. But the sun was hardly down, and, for nothing that I could say, would the young noble wait till the dark was overhead: and then, after we had waded the brook for may be half an hour, nothing would satisfy him but he must clamber the bank, that he might walk dry and smoothly upon the soft grass. And with that up goeth they with him. 'For Christ's sake,' saith I to him, 'keep where you be, Sir Thane: here we go in the shade; and if any ugly Dane hears our foot-tread, he thinks it nought but the stream among the stones: but, if you get up yonder, fifty to one, saith I, but you'll be seen by some hawk-eyed thief or other.' 'Nay, nay,' saith he, 'keep you below, if you will, till we get nearer to the watch-fire, and then we'll come down to you. The bushes are thick along the bank, we'll keep close to them,

and stoop our heads, and have a sharp look-out. We'll never be seen take my caution for that: and if I see any one on the prowl, we'll all be down to you in the twinkling of an eye.' Well, —I said all I could to stay him,—but up he would go, and they after him. So softly goes I along, keeping a look upon them, for I saw them most times well enow through the leaves, with the clear sky behind; and every now and then, when they was getting a-head of me, I flings a small pebble among the bushes close to 'em, as we had agreed, just to let 'em know that they was over fast for me. Well—there was they,—stooping and creeping along the soft grass, and thinking themselves no doubt wiser men than me, that was knee-deep and waist-deep in the water among rough stones;—and every now and then they glowers about 'em to see that all was clear,—and then on again creeps they,—and then again they stops,—and then on again they steals, —but howsoever, before they'd got half way, as I said, whiz comes half a dozen lances through the bushes,—one of 'em within half a yard of my head,—up goes a shout above,—and in the next

moment pop comes upon 'em, as if they'd fallen from the sky, maybe eight or ten Danes, and fangs 'em all as neat as a greyhound would a sitting hare. But it was no fault of mine, and I could do nothing to help 'em: so, after waiting till they were all out of ear-shot, back goes I safe to my cottage, while them poor fellows was maybe lying stark and stiff on the cold ground. So now do you be advised, good Sir Thane;—have a little patience to go on a tried road, and dont throw away life like dirt. Man is not like a cat with nine lives, as they say,—though, poor things! when they be once hanged, I never knew them come to again, for my part: but, for a man, the push of a lance, or the stroke of a sword, is enough, once and for ever."

It was less from curiosity to hear this to the end that Edmund paused, than from a wish to deliberate a little before he resolved upon the course to be pursued. He paid slight attention to the details of the story; but, after enquiring the name of the young noble who had been so unfortunate, and finding that both name and rank were wholly unknown to the peasant, he resolved to penetrate,

for some distance at least, into the camp, that he might with more certainty be able to report its true state.

" The peril is not so great to-night," he said, " when the whole camp is disordered, and apparently without watch or guard, as yesterday, when every eye was vigilant. I shall proceed some way; and, if detected, can easily escape any pursuit likely to be made. Wait for me here till the moon rises; and, if by that time I return not, go on your way. But can you give me any direction for reaching the gate of the castle, should I succeed in crossing the camp?"

" Nay," returned the peasant, " if you can clear the valley, and get close to the hill, you will have little hardship to scramble up, and make yourself heard by the sentinels. But take heed to let them know you in time for a friend, or an arrow flight, or perchance a lance head through your armour, may be the first greeting that you'll get."

" I shall have a care of that, my friend," replied Edmund: " so the good night to you; for I have no thought that we shall soon meet again."

"The saints go with you, Sir Thane!" said the guide: "I will tarry here till moon-rise, and maybe somewhat later; for you will never clear the camp,—and Christ forfend that you should not return,—though a no very wise errand are you going upon,—that I must say."

END OF VOLUME SECOND.

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